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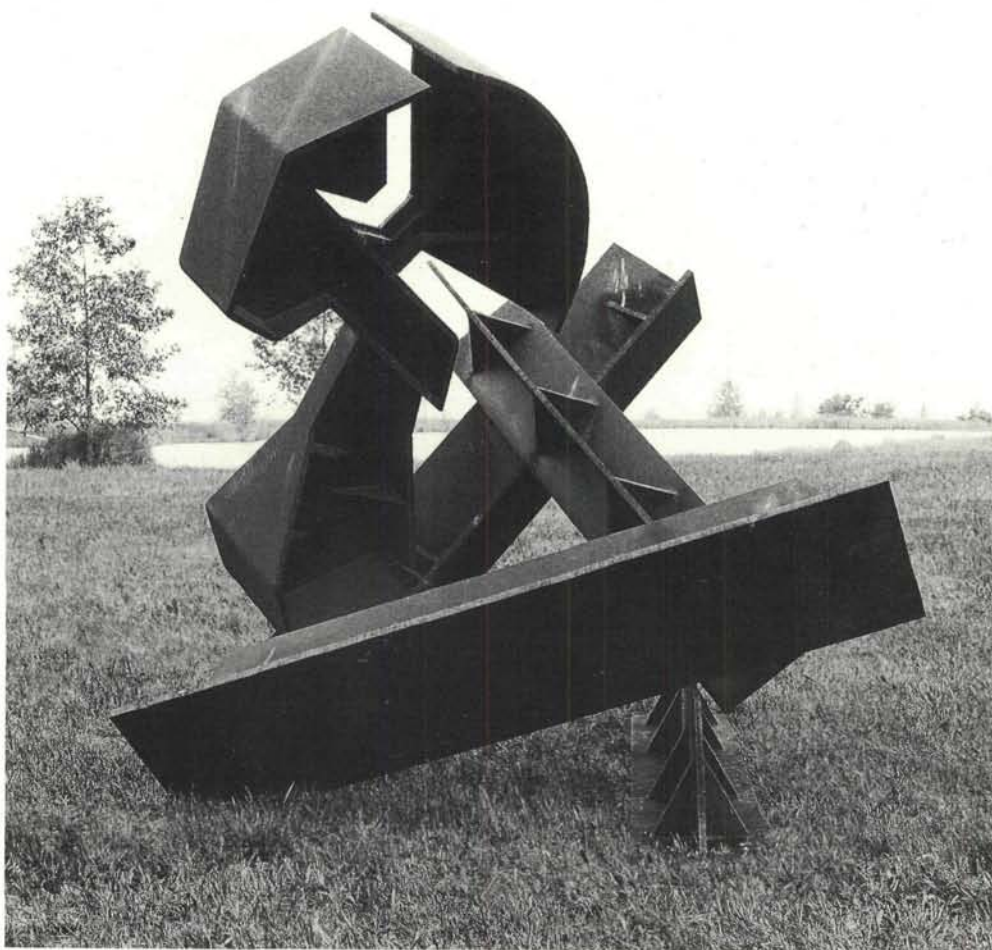
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Bruce Bawer wrote on Dylan Thomas for the April issue of *The New Criterion*.

Victor M. Cassidy is working on a biography of Wyndham Lewis.

Robert Greer Cohn's *Way of Art: Literature, Music, Painting in France*, the second volume of *A Critical Work*, has just been published in the Stanford French and Italian Series.

Robert Craft is the editor of *Stravinsky: Selected Correspondence* and the author of *Present Perspectives*, a collection of essays.

W. S. Di Piero's most recent book of poems is *Early Light*.

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Richard Serra at MOMA

by *Hilton Kramer*

The Richard Serra exhibition which has come to the Museum of Modern Art this spring is an event bound to disturb—perhaps even infuriate—a great many more people than it pleases.¹ In this respect, as in others, the exhibition is completely faithful to the spirit of Mr. Serra's work, which from the outset of his career—some twenty years ago—has been conceived of as a series of provocations. Yet it would be a mistake, I think, to allow this posture of provocation to set the terms of our response to the sculpture which we encounter in the MOMA exhibition. It would also, alas, be a mistake to discount it entirely. For the element of provocation is an integral part of Mr. Serra's artistic program. It would therefore be absurd to ignore it.

The problem, in Mr. Serra's case, is to determine exactly what *artistic* role the artist's posture of provocation plays in the creation of his sculpture. This is not an easy task, however, for the artist himself has done much to obscure the issue, and his many "activist" champions—no doubt taking their warrant from the artist's own attitudes and then raising the ante, so to speak, in their own political interests—have done even more. We need to be reminded, then, that it is as an *artist*—and not as something else—

that Mr. Serra's primary claim on our attention rests. To see what that claim really amounts to, it is therefore essential that we separate the art from the artist's reputation. And this, in turn, means that on the occasion of the present exhibition at MOMA, we must separate the art from the texts describing it in the catalogue accompanying the show—texts which MOMA itself, in an extraordinary disclaimer, has all but disavowed but which it has obviously deemed politic to publish without interference.²

There is no mystery, of course, as to how this unusual situation, in which the museum finds itself publicly at odds with its own publication, has come about. The museum had apparently intended for some time to devote an exhibition to Mr. Serra's work. Before much headway could be made in that endeavor, however, Mr. Serra suddenly emerged as a figure of considerable controversy. The large outdoor sculpture called *Tilted Arc*, which he created for the plaza of the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building in lower Manhattan on a commission from the General Services Administration, became the focus of a fierce debate. A great many people who work in the Javits building—people who have to live with the sculpture every

1 "Richard Serra/Sculpture," organized by Laura Rosenstock and Rosalind E. Krauss, opened at the Museum of Modern Art on February 27 and closes on May 13.

2 *Richard Serra/Sculpture* by Rosalind E. Krauss. Edited and with an Introduction by Laura Rosenstock. Essay by Douglas Crimp. The Museum of Modern Art (clothbound, \$40; paperback, \$22.50).

working day—strongly objected to it. (The sculpture consists of a Cor-Ten steel wall, measuring one hundred and twenty feet in length and twelve feet in height, which bisects the building's plaza.) This led to a hearing on the suitability of the work. As a result of the hearing, a decision was made to order the removal of *Tilted Arc* to another site, and this prompted further debate. (It did not cause the work to be removed, by the way. At this writing, it remains in place.) Naturally, given the current climate of opinion, the whole episode made of Mr. Serra something of an artist-hero and, owing to the fact that *Tilted Arc* was a government commission, something of a political martyr as well.

As I have elsewhere given my opinion on this work and the controversy surrounding it, I do not propose to go into the matter again in any detail here.³ Suffice to say that I was not one of those who succumbed to the charms of *Tilted Arc*, nor was I persuaded that the decision to order its removal from the Javits plaza constituted a crime against art, society, or anything else. On the contrary, it seems to me that there are legitimate reasons for objecting to the work and that the entire controversy has done much to illuminate the deeply problematic nature of the project which has come to be called public art—a vast and expensive program upon which the government embarked with a great deal of naïveté and a woeful paucity of serious thought about its implications or indeed its essential purposes.

What is of more direct concern here, however, is the role which the *Tilted Arc* affair has played in the presentation of the MOMA exhibition. By its very nature, of course, *Tilted Arc* could not be included in the exhibition. There is, to be sure, a photograph of the work in the show, as there are of the artist's many other immense public sculptures both here and abroad. But photographs are not sculpture, and the photo-

graphs in question are in many cases extremely misleading. This is certainly the case with the photograph of *Tilted Arc*. It does not in any sense suggest what it is actually like to experience the sculpture *in situ*, which is what the controversy is really about. *Tilted Arc* is by no means the only work photographically misrepresented in this way in the MOMA show. A sculpture I very much admire—the construction called *Carnegie*, which was erected last fall outside the entrance of the Museum of Art at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh—is similarly misrepresented by an aerial view of a kind which is vouchsafed to almost no one but the birds (and professional photographers seeking bird's-eye views). We can hardly be surprised, then, that it is one of these aesthetically sanitized photographs of *Tilted Arc* which adorns the cover of the MOMA publication, which is not really a catalogue of the exhibition but a propaganda offering wholly devoted to exalting Mr. Serra in his role as artist-hero and political martyr.

The question which therefore most urgently needs to be asked about the sculpture of Richard Serra at this juncture is this: What is it we are left with when all the controversy and role-playing is put aside? With this question in mind, the MOMA exhibition turns out to be an event of exceptional artistic interest. By no means is everything in the exhibition an unqualified artistic success, in my opinion. But there is much that is. And there can be no question, I think, but that Mr. Serra has taken sculpture in a direction that is new, however much his work may owe to the ideas of his contemporaries. What is original in his work may not always be to our liking, perhaps—but it nonetheless leaves the art of sculpture significantly altered.

Every artist is shaped to one degree or another by his moment of entry into the art scene, and Mr. Serra has proved to be no exception to the rule. His moment of entry came in the turmoil of the Sixties, and in his work there is still to be discerned some of the characteristic forms of that period and

3 See "Art Since the War: Who Will Write Its History?" in *The New Criterion*, Summer 1985, pages 7-8.

some of its characteristic attitudes, too (not all of which found their way directly into art at the time.) Much of the new art of that period—especially the new abstract art—was not only highly formalistic in spirit but cool and impersonal in feeling. Elementary shapes—geometric or at least straight-edged—predominated, and in sculpture there was a distinct preference for outsize scale and for an industrial or fabricated look in the finish of the work. Such were the established characteristics of Minimal sculpture when Mr. Serra arrived on the scene in the Sixties, and he very quickly made them his own. Minimalism became the “tradition” to which he attached himself.

To this tradition, however, was added something else: the notion that both the process by means of which the sculpture is executed and the specific space in which it is created must henceforth be regarded not merely as the circumstantial conditions of the work’s realization but as essential, defining aspects of its artistic existence. Hence the emergence of so-called process art and site-specific sculpture, in both of which Mr. Serra played a much publicized role.

Not all of the influences which shaped Mr. Serra’s outlook in the Sixties were strictly aesthetic, of course. There was also the *révolté* ethos of the counterculture, which called for a programmatic resistance to whatever could then be regarded as established social practice. The innovations inherent in both process art and site-specific sculpture were born of this spirit of resistance, but in themselves they proved to be feeble as well as temporary challenges to the artistic status quo—and no challenge whatever to the established social order. With few exceptions, they were easily assimilated into the patronage system they were ostensibly designed to challenge, and have remained a permanent feature of an expanded art world ever since. What began as a radical attack on established artistic conventions was very quickly embraced as a new artistic orthodoxy. Which is why a “radical” artist like Mr. Serra could so swiftly become the darling of cultural bureaucrats, bourgeois

collectors, and highly placed academics throughout the Western world. It was not that he had failed to produce something new, but that within a decade of his debut he was clearly seen to be taking sculpture in a direction which, although new and in some respects startling, was nonetheless consistent with what prior modernist practice had prepared the way for.

I have already observed that Minimalism was the tradition to which Mr. Serra attached himself at the outset of his career, and he remains very much a Minimalist sculptor today—but a Minimalist with a difference. To the purely formalistic attributes of Minimalism he has added something odd and unexpected—an element of dread, or what might even be called fear, which I do not recall ever before encountering in a sculptural work in quite the same way. In much of Minimalist sculpture, no matter how elephantine the scale of the work may be, the highly simplified forms together with their impersonal surfaces and rigorously logical structures tend to have a rather benign, if not indeed a sedative, effect on any reasonably knowledgeable spectator. Just about the last thing in the world we expect to experience in the presence of these works is a sensation of dread. Far from posing either a physical or theoretical threat to our existence, Minimalist sculpture tends for the most part to relax the spirit and offer us the visual equivalent of nirvana—which is to say, deliverance from all sense of pain, anxiety, or trauma.

This is distinctly not the case with many of the steel constructions we encounter in the Serra exhibition at MOMA. For one thing, these sculptures occupy the museum’s spaces with an authority which is all but indistinguishable from a certain mode of aggression. Their outsize forms tend either to impede or direct our movements in or around them; to take an interest in these works is, to some extent, to surrender to their scale, which is not so much a human scale as a scale designed to diminish our sense of autonomy and volition. I speak particularly of the room-size constructions

which, by means of immense steel slabs, divide space in such a way as to hold us captive, direct our vision, and control our movements as a condition of seeing the work at all. I cannot speak for others, of course, but I doubt if I am the only spectator to find the experience of such works vaguely threatening. Enclosed in the vault-like spaces which the sculptor has created, one naturally wonders—not continuously, but from time to time—what would happen if one of these weighty steel members were suddenly to topple. Or rather, one doesn't wonder—one knows for certain that in such an event one would be crushed to death. Of course nothing does topple. Everything remains securely in place, and one is free to explore the work in perfect safety. And yet the implied threat is there—and it persists in remaining a constituent element in the experience of seeing Mr. Serra's work for as long as one lingers in its presence. Even with the constructions which one cannot enter—which are roped off from the viewer and which we therefore see from a space we do not share with the work itself—the delicate balances sustained by the huge steel plates give the impression of a precariousness that reinforces this sense of an implied threat and thus surrounds us with an atmosphere of dread.

I at least know of nothing quite like this in the history of sculpture. As Dr. Johnson famously said of the prospect of hanging, it is an experience that concentrates the mind. We leave this exhibition with a very vivid sense of having seen something and felt something we have never seen or felt before, and the memory of it is not soon dissipated. It remains fixed and unforgettable. Whether we like it or not—whether, indeed, we are meant to like it—is another question, and I very much doubt if this question of our “liking” the work is of compelling interest to Mr. Serra. I rather think he would believe he had failed in his mission if we were found to like it too quickly. (Which, if true, must make his current popularity among cultural bureaucrats something of a problem for him.) His primary aim (I gather) is to affect

and manipulate our response, to impose a certain control on our perceptions, and thus to shatter our complacency in the face of the art experience, and in this he certainly succeeds. The marriage of Minimalist form and existential dread turns out to be a potent combination.

I note with interest, by the way, that neither of the two sculptures which MOMA has acquired for its permanent collection—*Cutting Device: Base Plate Measure* (1969), which is the first work we see on entering the exhibition, and *Modern Garden Arc* (1986), which reposes in the museum's elegant sculpture garden—can be said to generate this sense of dread. They belong to Mr. Serra's more purely formalistic works. Which is entirely understandable. Vastly more space would be required for one of Mr. Serra's room-size constructions than MOMA has, or will ever have, available in its permanent collection. And there are probably other reasons why the museum has settled for what is, in truth, only a token representation of the artist's work in its permanent collection. Mr. Serra is not, after all, primarily a museum artist. As that wall of photographs documenting Mr. Serra's many public commissions reminds us, his major works have mainly been created for large outdoor sites, and I very much doubt if MOMA is ever going to turn over its beautiful garden to something akin to the *Tilted Arc*. Were it ever to do so, the uproar likely to ensue would make the whole controversy which has raged over the commission for the Javits plaza look like a pastoral idyll.

Instead of this unpleasant and indeed unthinkable prospect, the museum has turned over its book on Richard Serra to two authors—Rosalind E. Krauss and Douglas Crimp, co-editor and managing editor, respectively, of *October* magazine—who, for the most part, completely ignore the exhibition which MOMA has mounted on this occasion and offer the museum's public absolutely nothing in the way of an intelligible guide to the artist's work. In the customary *October* manner, the one gives us a post-structuralist disquisition of insurmountable

opacity while the other rides his political hobbyhorse for a replay of the *Tilted Arc* melodrama, grandly announcing that we have now, as a result of this controversy, witnessed "the redefinition of the site of the work of art as the site of political struggle." No wonder, then, that William Rubin, the director of the museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture, felt obliged in his preface to this publication to declare that "The Museum of Modern Art disagrees with the rhetorical tone and historical polemic of much that has been written about *Tilted Arc* here as elsewhere." We can assume that Mr. Serra got the publication he wanted and that getting it was one of the conditions he laid down for agreeing to this exhibition. That is the way it usually goes

nowadays with artist-heroes, especially those honored few who have also been elevated to the status of political martyrs. They get everything they ask for. But the fact remains that this MOMA exhibition is itself in no sense a "site of political struggle," nor is Mr. Serra himself of any outstanding interest as a political figure. He *is* of great interest as a sculptor, however, and it is a pity that an institution of MOMA's stature could not bring itself to offer its public even a hint about what the real nature of that interest might be. Its abject surrender in this matter has surely set a precedent it will live to regret, for the next time around the ante will be raised to a degree guaranteed to be even more unpleasant than anything the museum might have faced on this occasion.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to two recently published books by contributors to *The New Criterion*: Gertrude Himmelfarb's *Marriage and Morals Among the Victorians* (Knopf, \$19.95) and Norman Podhoretz's *The Bloody Crossroads: Where Literature and Politics Meet* (Simon and Schuster, \$16.95). Parts of these books were published in earlier issues of *The New Criterion*.

Art and patronage today

by Samuel Lipman

As far as patronage is concerned, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that all the arts are in pretty much the same condition today regardless of their separate developments and relative prosperities. This condition may be characterized as an inversion of John Kenneth Galbraith's famous (if not notorious) formulation about the state of American society in the late 1950s. For Professor Galbraith, America was then a land of private opulence and public squalor. For us today the arts in America are in a condition of public opulence and private decrepitude.

Clearly such a position does not represent the received wisdom. According to this quintessential distillation of past error, present self-service, and future illusion, the United States is the last haven of the private sector in culture. This supposed reality is pointed to with pride by conservative partisans of our democratic capitalistic society, but scorned by those who admire the glitter of European state culture. The proud cite the high level of private contributions to our arts institutions—made possible under a beneficent tax system—and the scornful lust after the cornucopia abroad of government largesse for such disparate artistic activities as the Berlin Philharmonic and the operas (if they can be called that) of the perennial avant-gardist Karlheinz Stockhausen.

There is no point in quoting statistics. Those available are, to put it most kindly, imperfect. But their burden is clear. In this country the preponderance of support for

the arts comes from the private sector; in Europe, it comes from government. Because everywhere the role of education in making artistic activity possible is so downplayed, it must be added that both here and abroad a substantial amount of money for the arts comes in the form of school budgets; in Europe these budgets come almost totally from government sources, and here largely so. In any case, our national *per capita* arts expenditures, combining private and public contributions, stack up well against the figures for most of the major European countries. It should therefore be understood that when people extol the European state arts-support systems as a model for our country, what they desire is not a switch from private support to public, but rather an increase in total support produced by an increase in public spending.

But the issue is not just money. The issue is rather the relationship of money to art. From this perspective, our present means of supporting art is little different from that in Europe, for arts support increasingly means the same thing, whether here or abroad: support of public, not private, culture. Or put another way, the support of art, whatever the source, is not the support of the individual tastes of the givers; rather it is the support of the tastes which are held widely in the society as a whole. This formulation may be obscure; it certainly is difficult.

To understand the present relation between art and patronage, it is necessary first

to describe something of the historic shift in the place of the arts in society during the four decades since World War II. In 1945, the greatest art was seen as belonging to high culture, which was the historical possession of a cultivated minority. This minority was usually of fortunate birth, mostly of economic privilege, and almost always of refined education. Whatever the art under discussion, whether visual arts, literature, music, or dance, the natural audience for it was small, self-selecting, and self-defining.

It goes without saying that although the culture favored by so restricted an audience was the leading intellectual and artistic force in society, it was not the only source of entertainment or art for the larger public. By 1945 popular culture was already carried by radio, recordings, and film (though not yet by television). It was widely seen by both its own audience and the smaller audience for high culture as an entirely separate activity, influencing more sophisticated pursuits and being influenced by them but nonetheless existing in its own world of creation and mass consumption. To use an up-to-date term, it could be said that while there was "crossover" between popular and high culture, there was very little confusion between them.

To be sure, this idea of a separate audience for an elite culture was deeply affected by the progress of what we might call the democratic ideal. European opera houses, after all, were built with many cheap seats and even with large areas for standing room, and the operas of Verdi did provide tunes for organ grinders on the streets. The emergence of public museums and public concerts in Europe occurred along with the coming of public education and universal literacy. But despite the democratic spread of culture, in the upper strata of many European societies there was deep satisfaction with the continuing reality of distinct cultures: one for the millions and another for those with the millions. These pre-industrial attitudes may be found today in the rigorously selective character of French

higher education and in the impregnable career status of its graduates. An analogous phenomenon is evident in the position of Oxford and Cambridge (and their graduates) in English life. Indeed, only in the most recent years can it be said that wherever one looks in Europe—take France and England as examples—one sees enormous and troubled concern on the part of government with what in the United States is called "outreach."

In America, the situation of elite culture has always been different. This country was founded, after all, as a reaction against the continuation of those aristocratic social attitudes which bordered on the feudal. Such aristocracy as we have had—one thinks immediately of the Adams family—either made its peace with democracy or found itself in external or internal exile. The new monied elite of the nineteenth century was deeply affected by the gospel of wealth, which itself was the product of the many leveling influences, both religious and secular, at work in the expansion of the original colonies into a continental nation. The watchword, of course, was education, which meant education for the masses as well as education for the elite. Indeed, all of us are beneficiaries of the strength of our national educative impulse.

The effect of American attitudes toward education was not restricted to McGuffey's Reader and the one-room schoolhouse. There was the great growth of our public schools, the founding of our public library system, the development of land-grant colleges, and the provision (well back in the nineteenth century) of facilities for what is now called adult education. In this connection, it is also important not to forget the extraordinary flowering in this country of privately financed and controlled education; it is equally important to remember that this private education often assumed denominational forms.

But beyond—although not *above* and beyond—education in its specialized sense of teachers, classes, and students, and beyond the provision of facilities for scientific and scholarly investigation such as the Rocke-

feller Institute for Medical Research in New York and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, culture for the masses included hefty doses of high artistic culture, regularly administered as a part of the social responsibilities of the leading figures of the community. The principle was the same whether the particular benefaction was the Metropolitan Museum or the Art Institute of Chicago in the second half of the nineteenth century or the Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery in the first half of the twentieth, the Juilliard School in New York or the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, the Metropolitan Opera in the East and the San Francisco Opera in the West. The duty of the lovers of high art was to provide that art in undefiled form as an *educational service* to those who by reason of birth, social position, economic status, and educational background did not, to put it in the vernacular, “know what they were missing.” Both the governing taste, and the money necessary to communicate that taste, belonged to the rich, the cultured, and the powerful; only the bodies on the receiving end belonged to the masses.

Curiously, despite the comfortable patrician assumption that the rich would stay rich and the poor poor, it was never questioned that the culture the masses really wanted was exactly the high art that their betters wanted for themselves. And curiously, too, this upper-class self-confidence remained in operation well into the recent past. To cite just one example, many opera fans alive today remember the haughty yet eagerly ingratiating tones of Mrs. August Belmont as she raised funds on the air for the Metropolitan Opera Guild from the millions of Saturday radio listeners across the United States and Canada.

But after 1945 something changed. With the death of Franklin Roosevelt and his replacement by Harry Truman, the age of political leaders drawn from the patriciate came to an end. The passage of the GI Bill and the Fulbright awards program by Congress opened up college study in this country to most Americans and, for many of the

brightest, even the prospect of graduate study abroad. A very few years later *Brown v. Board of Education*, along with the increasing entry of women into higher education, began the long-delayed process of making “most Americans” into “all Americans.” About 1950 the CIA discovered that judicious covert aid to culture and ideas abroad might influence intellectuals, and after 1953 the Eisenhower administration realized that cultural exchange programs could be a valuable tool in foreign policy.

In the 1960s, forces within the Kennedy administration, led nominally by the president’s wife but perhaps more effectively by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Richard Goodwin, and Michael Straight, argued for open federal support to the arts and the humanities. This support, in violation of a longtime taboo against American government interference with culture, was to be undertaken not for the purposes of foreign policy, or of social welfare (as had been the case in the 1930s with the WPA) or of ideological democratization. The arts and the humanities were to be supported for themselves, with *quality* as the sole criterion.

Yet there can be little doubt that another, and rather more complicated, reason for support was lurking in the background, surrounded by all the scrimshaw and the decorator rooms which have become a part of the cultural mythology of the Kennedy White House. This was the nagging idea that the existence in the United States of purely private culture—of a cultural life, that is, that did not receive the imprimatur of the state—robbed the state and its leaders of the legitimacy and the glory which in the great European countries was conferred by a rooted association with the imperishable monuments of civilization. There is evidence for the power of this nagging idea over Michael Straight, who later became deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts during the Nixon administration. In his 1982 memoirs, *After Long Silence*, Mr. Straight wrote that his much-postponed decision to tell the FBI about his involvement with the Anthony Blunt Soviet spi-

onage ring was forced by one fear: the exposure of his past might alter the fact that in 1963 "the United States Government accepted a limited but continuing responsibility for the advancement of the arts in America."

The legislation finally creating the National Endowment for the Arts (and the National Endowment for the Humanities) was not passed until the Johnson administration, where it took its place in the blizzard of Great Society legislation promulgated in the years following Kennedy's assassination. Small at first, the NEA grew rapidly under President Nixon and his NEA chairman, Nancy Hanks; this growth continued under President Carter and his chairman Livingston Biddle. It was not until the coming of Ronald Reagan in 1981 that the NEA budget leveled off, and indeed there are no signs today that the immediate future will see any increases for the agency. But regardless of the fact that NEA budgets are now on something of a plateau, one simple fact remains: no major arts event in the United States, and hardly a minor one either, takes place without the appearance of the telltale legend, printed in the material which accompanies the art: "this event is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency."

It is the proud claim of partisans of the NEA that the increase in government arts funding, coming not just from the federal treasury but increasingly from state and local entities as well, has meant an enormous increase in private funding. It is no secret that this increase has hardly come from individual contributions or even from foundation grants; in recent years these have remained constant, and in some cases have shown signs of decreasing, as many private foundations have decided to turn their agendas toward social welfare programs and related social action. The great increase in private funding has instead come from corporate sources, from those profit-making enterprises which have become convinced that the arts are good for business.

There is little need to remind the reader who these corporate Maecenases are. The largest corporate patrons have by now firmly established themselves in our minds. If one watches public television, one will immediately recognize the role of Exxon, Mobil, and ARCO; if one follows the museum world in New York, one will immediately think of Philip Morris and Equitable; if one is interested in orchestras on tour, one will think of AT&T and perhaps Citibank; if one listens to opera on radio, one's mind will turn to Texaco. And so it goes. So great has been the success of corporate sponsorship of art that long after the art presented has been forgotten the corporate logo on the screen remains firmly fixed in our minds.

It may be taken for granted that money is a good thing. No one would like to do without it. Furthermore, no one would dispute the proposition that if more money in general is a good thing, more money for the arts is a wonderful thing. And yet one may surely be pardoned for quietly asking: "More money for what?" Just what has all this money from new forms of patronage, both governmental and non-governmental, brought us in the way of art?

In my own opinion, it has brought us very little, and what it has brought has been often harmful to the true cause of art and its lovers. It must be said at the outset that this new money has on many occasions gone to worthwhile artists, and has brought much worthwhile art to millions who might never have become part of what is now so nicely called the arts audience. It must be said, too, that under this new financial dispensation, more people than ever before are calling themselves artists—well over one million by the census bureau's last reckoning. And there are vastly more arts institutions, too, run by vastly more arts professionals working in marketing, development, publicity, community relations, personnel, accounting, and generalized mass advocacy.

More people in the audience, more people calling themselves artists, more institutions and people working in them, and everybody spreading the gospel: what, in

God's name, could be bad about all these virtues existing in such a state of plenty? The answer is that all this activity is not about the creation of art, or art education. Rather, it signifies the transformation of the art of the past into consumables for the present, along with the trivialization of what has been, and is being, created.

Let us begin with public television, the flagship of all this new patronage. Here, on the tens of millions of television sets in American homes, may be found just what in the arts governmental and corporate patrons think should be watched. In the theater, Shakespeare and schlock, both archly delivered, from England; in music, the warhorses of the European classics and American pop, both in routinized performances; in opera, the safest repertory imaginable, handled with kid gloves; in dance, only a smattering of the new developments which have made America the capital of the dance world; in the visual arts, blockbuster programs rich in glib judgments and expensive travel shots. Of the history of the modern arts in America there is almost nothing; of the history of our great literature nothing; of the arts and the humanities for small but highly educated audiences nothing; of arts education, nothing. Of the meretricious personalities in the performing arts of our day there is, however, everything.

As with public television, so with a broad range of arts today. In all too many cases the prime criterion for giving and getting help, in both government and corporate support, is not the particular character of the art being done, nor the need. It is purely and simply high visibility, or the possibility of such visibility soon. In vanishingly few cases is the criterion for support the pleasing of the *taste* of the patron. In the vast majority of cases the criterion is that the grantee, now or in the near future, bring the grantor favorable publicity.

Just because this requirement of favorable image recognition is so widely observed, it is foolish indeed to talk of a governmental or a corporate taste in culture and art. The architecture of Lincoln Center, so wrongly called

"Mussolini modern" by some critics, does not represent corporate taste. It represents what the powerful in business and government believe their fellow New Yorkers and Americans of a certain substance will like. Similarly, the art in the Whitney Museum branches at the Philip Morris building and the new Equitable Life Assurance Society building in New York does not represent the artistic taste of corporate bureaucracy, any more than the grants made by the National Endowment for the Arts represent what governmental leaders think art is or should be. All these efforts represent an attempt to please important economic, social, and political constituencies. When artists are consulted, it is because a judgment has been made that they will produce or select well-liked work; when the avant-garde is supported it is out of a desire on the part of various funders to be thought up-to-date and "with it." The struggle everywhere is not so much to do substantive good in any particular art as to be seen to be doing good for the arts as a whole.

Even when corporate and governmental support is directed toward the needs of the grantee rather than the grantor, the funds are often not directed at covering the basic operating costs of the institution or at supporting the art. Instead, the money must be used to expand programming or fund-raising. Programming must be expanded to bring in audiences regardless of the artistic or financial cost, and money must be raised in ever-increasing amounts regardless of how much it costs to raise or of how much programming must be changed in order to appeal to a broader base of funders. The reality of support for the arts in this country at the present time is well described in the words of an arts-contributions officer of a major corporation who was addressing the head of a very distinguished arts institution: "We don't give anyone fish, we give a fishing rod." This oracular saying can be translated in a way every grant applicant in the arts knows only too well. Money is given primarily for the purpose of enabling more money to be raised from others. The key to such

expanded fund-raising is increased visibility; such visibility is only obtained by expanded programming and activities—far-flung orchestral touring and highly publicized blockbuster museum exhibitions, to mention only two examples—which please the largest possible audience.

As the reader will have noticed, throughout my description of contemporary patronage I have yoked business and government. I have not done so because I think that the responsibility for the present situation in arts patronage falls equally on both. The pressures beating on government are pressures which arise out of our political system, out of the day-to-day legislative and administrative process which guarantees our liberties. Government personnel, after all, must be at least as much representatives as leaders. Private patrons, however, have a greater freedom and a much greater responsibility to choose their course of action.

I have yoked government and business because, despite the very real differences which should separate them, there is an intimate, and I believe deeply mistaken, link between the decision-making processes which govern their support for the arts. This link can be simply described. Government, in order to demonstrate maximum impact for its grants, finds it most convenient to support that to which corporations have been contributing; at the same time corporations, in order to avoid artistic responsibility for their decisions, rely increasingly on the “governmental good housekeeping seal of approval” as the necessary condition for their own grant-making.

It is this linkage between government and business patronage of the arts which constitutes the public opulence mentioned earlier. The private decrepitude is simply the other side of the opulence. Board members who go to the concerts or the operas which their boards oversee are scarce, as are volunteers willing to contribute their own money rather than just work endlessly to get others to give. Patrons who make individual, artistically competent, and committed deci-

sions about what their own money—not the taxpayers’ money, not the shareholders’ money, not the community foundation donors’ money—will support are in short supply. Above all, knowing, discriminating, core audiences—and here I speak authoritatively about music, but I fear that what I am saying can easily be matched in other artistic fields—are getting smaller and less sure of themselves year by year. They are being replaced by casual and even fickle audiences who are less and less capable of understanding the art being offered to them, and who demand more and more celebrity performances and a cheapened repertory as a price for their continued presence.

Despite all the negative aspects of this story, in fairness it must be stated that the present situation is not a conspiracy, not the result of evil intentions, not even the result of political and economic opportunism, but rather the result of an *educational* failure in the arts. The problem is not bad motives; those responsible for our present system of public patronage, whether governmental or corporate, mean well. They like art. They have a general perception that art is a good thing. They are responsible citizens. They want to help. But in all too many cases they do not themselves know what to do. Their problem, like that of the audience, is insufficient knowledge. Insufficient knowledge of art, of the high culture of which we should be so proud, of the connections which civilization makes possible between a known past and an unknown future.

It must be repeated yet once more that this insufficient knowledge is responsible not just for the kind of patronage we see today but also for the behavior of the public this patronage is attempting to reach. This situation is merely the adult equivalent of the lowered scores we see everywhere in students’ general comprehension of and knowledge about the arts. The scores themselves, it need hardly be stressed, are but the symptom of the state of arts education in our nation today.

What is the way out of this depressing situation? The way out can only be found

through education. Perhaps now that the climate for education has changed so much in so many subjects we are ready for a new look at education in the arts. Perhaps we are now ready to understand that art, like every other intellectual activity, is composed of skills and knowledge; that art can be taught and learned; that beauty, no matter how difficult it is to define, is not merely a matter of the feelings, but partakes of the nature of objective reality.

We cannot go back, in arts patronage, to a pre-democratic era of rule by an elite few. Whatever the mix of private individuals, corporations, and government is to be—and it is very much to be hoped that individual

patronage will increasingly constitute our predominant mode of support—only education can promise that informed citizens, in art as in politics, will be able to make wise choices. This will hardly be the first time in the life of democracy that education has become the saving hope: more than a century ago, the English liberal politician Robert Lowe advised those who wished to extend the franchise that “it will be absolutely necessary that you should prevail on our future masters to learn their letters.” We know that these letters include literature, mathematics, and the sciences. It is now our job to convince our society that these letters include a serious and high art as well.

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by Joseph Epstein

For some years now I have been telling an anecdote, always prefacing it by announcing that it is my favorite literary anecdote, large parts of which, I have come to discover, I seem to have invented. I have not made the anecdote up out of whole cloth, but the dacron, the nylon, and the filaments of polyester in it are mine. In this anecdote Tolstoy and Chekhov are walking about Yasnaya Polyana, Tolstoy's country estate. Tolstoy is in his standard rustic rig: loose tunic, baggy trousers held up by a hemp rope and tucked into boots that come up to his knees, a beard that resembles a triple serving of California sprouts, his famous potato nose (which was much like the actor Karl Malden's), and a floppy peasant hat. He is old and slightly crouched yet still sinewy and looking, as someone once described him, like a giant dwarf. Chekhov is in black suit and vest, a black round-brimmed hat pushed back off his forehead, a black goatee and mustache, a black-rimmed monocle affixed to his right eye and held to his lapel by a black string, black shoes, and no tie but a white shirt buttoned at the collar. He is bent and frail and looking, as I don't believe anyone has ever described him, like an elongated and russified Charlie Chaplin. They stroll amid graceful poplars, slender birches, brooding willows. Tolstoy, his arm around the shoulder of his younger companion, speaks in a voice that knows no doubt, though, in my rendering of it, there is a slight Yiddish lilt to his inflection and syntax:

"Anton Pavlovich," he says, "believe me when I say I admire your stories. No one, dear Anton Pavlovich, admires your stories more than I. More stories, Anton Pavlovich, I implore you to write more stories: wonderful stories, true stories, imperishable stories. But your plays, Anton Pavlovich, really dear boy, of your plays what can one say? Your plays, Anton Pavlovich, are vile stuff—worse even than Shakespeare."

In this anecdote the landscaping and much of the dialogue turn out to be mine. The clothes were Tolstoy's and Chekhov's, and the sentiments were for the most part Tolstoy's, though I have him admiring Chekhov's stories rather more than he actually did. What I have done, I now see, is stitch this anecdote together out of two biographies of Tolstoy I read many years ago. Henri Troyat, in his biography, has Tolstoy put an arm around Chekhov's shoulder not at Yasnaya Polyana but at Gaspra, in the Crimea, and say to him, "Shakespeare's plays are bad enough, but yours are even worse." In his biography, Ernest J. Simmons has Chekhov at the then ill Tolstoy's bedside, when the older man takes him by the hand, looks into his eyes, and says, "'Anton Pavlovich, you are a fine man.' Then, smiling, he releases Chekhov's hand and adds, 'But your plays are altogether vile.'"

What I love about this anecdote is, in part, the nature of the insult. "Worse even than Shakespeare," after all, is not everyone's

notion of a strong insult; as an insult, it is in the same class as calling a poet not even as good as Homer. (Was it Robert Southey who once told another poet that his, the other poet's, works would be remembered long after Homer's were forgotten—but not *until*?) But for Tolstoy, who detested Shakespeare's plays and never understood what all the fuss over them was about, to call someone's plays worse than Shakespeare's was a serious put-down. Which brings me to my second reason for adoring this anecdote: it is a story about the stupidity of genius, and such stories always comfort those of us who are not geniuses. If geniuses can on occasion be stupid, cannot the rest of us, perhaps, on occasion be geniuses?

Yet this anecdote is not entirely a laughing matter. For the truth seems to be that Tolstoy and Chekhov, though each respected and may even have loved the other, had radically different views about the purpose of literature—radically different and perhaps irreconcilable views. Because of their high mutual regard—even though Tolstoy was thirty-two years older than Chekhov and would survive him by six years—these differences were never allowed altogether out into the open. "Chekhov was with us," Tolstoy writes to one of his sons, "and I like him very much. He is very talented and he must have a good heart, but so far he has given no evidence of possessing a definite point of view." Chekhov was briefly enamored of Tolstoyan ideas, but when he shucked them off he did so emphatically, writing to his publisher and friend Alexei Suvorin: "Prudence and justice tell me there is more love for mankind in electricity and steam than in chastity and abstention from meat. War is an evil and the court system is an evil, but it doesn't follow that I should wear bast shoes and sleep on a stove alongside the hired hand and his wife, and so on and so forth."

When Chekhov published "The Darling," a story about a woman who has no true existence apart from the men and a child she loves, Tolstoy published a rejoinder to the story, calling it charming but making plain

—as if Tolstoy knew how to write other than plainly—that, although Chekhov evidently meant to mock his heroine, the effect of reading the story is to remind one how "marvelous and holy" is "her faculty of devoting herself with her whole being to any one she loves." Chekhov was, Tolstoy claimed, unfortunately writing under the influence of "the absurd and evil activity of the fashionable woman movement." When Tolstoy began to publish segments of *What Is Art?*, Chekhov, writing to a friend, remarked that Tolstoy's "idea is not new; it's been reiterated in various forms by clever old men in every century." Tolstoy's reaction to *The Seagull* was to think it a shoddy imitation of Ibsen. Chekhov's mature opinion of *The Kreutzer Sonata* was that it was "ridiculous and confused"; he also thought Tolstoy's ending for *Resurrection*, relying as it does on a Gospel text, bogus in the extreme. The very paragraph before he makes this criticism of *Resurrection*, however, Chekhov indites what is perhaps the most magnificent tribute that one writer has ever offered to another:

I fear Tolstoy's death. His death would leave a large empty space in my life. First, I have loved no man the way I have loved him. I am not a believer, but of all beliefs I consider his the closest to mine and most suitable for me. Second, when literature has a Tolstoy, it is easy and gratifying to be a writer. Even if you are aware that you have never accomplished anything and are still not accomplishing anything, you don't feel so bad, because Tolstoy accomplishes enough for everyone. His activities provide justification for the hopes and aspirations that are usually placed on literature. Third, Tolstoy stands firm, his authority is enormous, and as long as he is alive bad taste in literature, all vulgarity in its brazen-faced or lachrymose varieties, all bristly or resentful vanity will remain far in the background. His moral authority alone is enough to maintain what we think of as literary trends and schools at a certain minimal level. If not for him, literature would be a flock without a shepherd or an unfathomable jumble.

While Tolstoy said, apropos of Chekhov's stories, that "his mastery is of the highest order," the real gravamen of his complaint against Chekhov was his feeling that the younger writer was without a clear point of view. Tolstoy was of course a dominant, and by implication a domineering, figure, and his accusation might be read to mean that Chekhov, far from being without a point of view, merely had a point of view too far from Tolstoy's own. Yet there is good reason to doubt that this is quite so. For a great many other people had no difficulty in finding a clear point of view in Chekhov's writing; or, it is more accurate to say, a great many people found a great many opposed points of view in Chekhov's writing. In its own way this tends to confirm Tolstoy's feeling that Chekhov's art, however high its technical mastery, was in some sense curiously unfocused.

When critics and fellow writers tended to find a ready point of view in Chekhov's writing, it only made him edgy and sometimes angry. From fairly early in his literary career, readers used Chekhov as something akin to a Rorschach test in which they would discover their own sympathies and antipathies, obsessions and politics. At one time or another Chekhov was thought to be decadent, religiously orthodox, unfeeling, almost sappily tender-hearted, indifferent to the issues of his day, hostage to the issues of his day (note Tolstoy's remark about his writing under the influence of the "woman movement"), and of course both liberal and conservative. The revolutionary Maxim Gorky, for example, wrote to Chekhov that "*Uncle Vanya* is a completely new species of dramatic art, it is a hammer with which you pound in the public's empty heads," and he praised Chekhov for his coldness, which was exactly what others blamed him for. As Simon Karlinsky notes in his excellent edition of the *Letters of Anton Chekhov* (1973), this was "the kind of Chekhov Gorky wanted to exist and the kind he could have loved, rather than the Chekhov who actually lived and whom we know from his stories, plays and letters." That is very well said, but

it leaves open the answer to a serious question that has never been altogether satisfactorily dealt with—namely, who was the Chekhov who actually lived and whom we know from his stories, plays, and letters?

The first of the many complications about Anton Chekhov is that he was a good family man who had had a miserable childhood. Chekhov was born in 1860 in Taganrog, a southern port town of roughly sixty thousand inhabitants some six hundred miles from Moscow. He was the third of six children. His father, Paul Chekhov, was a grocer who went bankrupt when Anton was still in adolescence, an event from which he, the father, never quite recovered. (His father's father had been a serf, but, through impressive energy and thrift, had saved 3,500 rubles with which to buy his freedom.) Before he crumbled, Paul Chekhov was a tyrant in his own home, forcing his children to undergo interminable church services, work long hours at his store, and perform well at school; floggings were not an irregular occasion. Yet such treatment did not crush the young Chekhov, as their painful childhoods did such writers as Dickens, Kafka, and Hemingway. "He had less pride and greater simplicity than a person born in the West," writes Irene Nemirovsky, one of Chekhov's biographers. "He was unhappy, but he did not brood over the subtler causes of his unhappiness, nor add to it the poison of wounded vanity."

The harsh narrow-mindedness Chekhov faced at home was complemented by the brutality and squalor endemic to the streets of a nineteenth-century provincial Russian town. In a story entitled "My Life," which is not otherwise about Chekhov's own life at all, Chekhov, through the story's narrator, recalled life in a town similar to Taganrog:

I remembered the tortured dogs, driven mad, the live sparrows plucked naked by boys and flung into the water, and a long, long series of obscure lingering miseries which I had looked on continually from early childhood in that town; and I could not understand what these

sixty thousand people lived for, what they read the gospel for, why they prayed, why they read books and magazines. What good had they gained from all that had been said and written hitherto if they were still possessed by the same spiritual darkness and hatred of liberty, as they were a hundred and three hundred years ago?

One of the advantages a writer has over someone who doesn't write is that the writer can at least find use for his early unhappiness in his later writing. Not that Chekhov appears to have suffered more sorely than his brothers and sisters. But unlike them he seems to have been equipped from the outset with an exceptionally good mental gyroscope, which throughout his life helped him to maintain equilibrium. True, the rough conditions of his childhood endowed him with a *sang-froid* that at moments can chill one's own blood, for he had no illusions about natural affection and could say of his own father that he was "a man of average caliber unable to rise above his situation." But his youth made it impossible for him ever to become interested in conventional religion, and he could never understand intellectuals who were religious. His upbringing also gave him a permanent hatred of brutishness and filth. At sixteen, after it became clear that his father would not recover his fortunes in Taganrog, the Chekhov family departed for Moscow, leaving Anton pretty much to fend for himself while finishing his secondary education, which, in a less than ideal way, developed self-reliance in him. It was a hard, even wretched life—stripping away illusions, inducing skepticism, revealing brutality, demanding independence—but excellent training for becoming Anton Chekhov.

None of the biographies of Chekhov speak with any certainty of how it came about that he decided to become a physician. He was not an outstanding student; not particularly able at acquiring foreign languages, he finished eleventh in a class of twenty-three at Taganrog in a curriculum built around language study. Medical school was

a five-year course; then, as now, it was a grind; then, unlike now, there was no pot of gold waiting at its end. What is impressive to contemplate is that Chekhov not only managed to get through his medical studies but did so while managing the beginning of a career as a writer—a very active writer, too—and becoming the head of his family, which meant having the financial responsibility for from anywhere between four and eight people.

No more is known about what lay behind Chekhov's decision to become a writer. The only aptitude he had shown in this line was an adolescent knack for mimicry. Certainly as a young man Chekhov never thought idealistically of writing—as the pursuit of truth and beauty and all that—nor, at least in his early years, did he think of it as a serious vocation. Once he had rejoined his family in Moscow, he wrote to bring in the rubles—though, given the comic periodicals in which his first writings appeared, to bring in the kopecks would be more precise, for Chekhov's early comic sketches earned him roughly a nickel a line. Chekhov became adept at knocking this stuff out; he had no choice but to become adept. His two older brothers' activities in the fields of drinking and whoring had certified them as unreliable; his two younger brothers and his sister were still of school age and hence too young to work. The father earned a menial wage for doing menial work. In three years in Moscow the family moved eleven times. Without brother Anton's earnings from his scribbling, the Chekhov family might well have slipped into beggary, or worse.

The world, it sometimes seems, is divided between those people who leave a mess and those who agree to clean it up. Chekhov, though not particularly happy about it, was clearly among those who clean up. He had become head of his family by default, and its head he remained, for his parents lived the remainder of their lives with him, and his sister Mariya (Masha) lived under his roof even after he was dead, whence she served as the custodian of his works and reputation long after the Bolsheviks had captured Rus-

sia. Would Chekhov have written differently if he had not had to serve his literary apprenticeship under the financial pressure of having to support a family? Perhaps. But then again he may not have written at all. As it was, in 1885, his first year out of medical school, Chekhov, in the most un-Yaddo-like conditions imaginable, working on a dining-room table, with family and borders strolling by as if along the Grande Jatte, published something like 129 stories, sketches, and articles. But then, as Simon Karlinsky says, there is "no word in Russian to convey the concept of privacy."

It is sometimes difficult to get a clear fix on the distribution of energy Chekhov expended between medicine and literature. Apropos of pursuing two careers, he wrote, "I don't see what's so impossible about chasing two hares at once," and added, "Medicine is my lawful wedded wife and literature my mistress. When one gets on my nerves, I spend the night with the other." Yet things appear to have been more often the other way round; that is, literature appears to have been Chekhov's wife and medicine his mistress. At any rate, apart from a period he spent as a student assistant in a *zemstvo* hospital, and his work during the Russian cholera epidemic of 1892-93, medicine rarely dominated his life. During his 1890 trip to Sakhalin Island, the Russian version of Devil's Island in Siberia, Chekhov combined his careers of physician and writer, by first scientifically surveying conditions on the island and then writing a dissertation-like book on them. Otherwise he saw patients whenever they approached him, as peasants near his later abodes in the Melikhovo region and in Yalta had no hesitation in doing; he rarely charged a fee and he never had anything like a regular medical practice. The chief source of his income was literature; and literature was his regular practice.

Chekhov allowed that his work as a physician had greatly influenced him as a writer. As he put it in a biographical note he wrote for a medical-school class reunion, medicine

"significantly broadened the scope of my observations and enriched me with knowledge whose value for me as a writer only a doctor can appreciate." Medicine was, he goes on in effect to say, a reality instructor, and it is true that Chekhov's scientific training gave an empirical bent to his writing. People come to physicians in extreme situations, and Chekhov, as a physician, had a greater than ordinary dose of humanity stripped of its dignity. He did not come to literature loaded down with ideas he wished to prove; he found the passionate pronouncements of other writers about the grandeur of mankind not only pompous but slightly laughable—and these things, too, are doubtless owed to his medical training and practice. His experience as a physician also lent Chekhov a coolness of perspective that could sometimes seem a bit ghastly, as when he spoke of cholera "making hors d'oeuvres of our local rustics," but that same perspective could turn hot when he was viewing what he took to be the inanity of the political idealists of his time: "All their inactive sanctity and purity are based on hazy and naive sympathies and antipathies to individuals and labels, not to facts. It's easy to be pure when you can hate the Devil you don't know and love the God you wouldn't have brains enough to doubt." So much for political purity, and even less for opinionation. "There are a great many opinions in the world," Chekhov wrote, "and a good half of them are held by people who have never been in trouble."

Chekhov did not automatically come by such strong opinions—opinions, even, about opinions. He was talented, he was almost movie-star handsome, yet his own view of himself as a young man was far from a confident one. "What aristocratic writers take from nature gratis, the less privileged must pay for with their youth," he wrote to a friend, adding that a writer as low-born as he had had to squeeze "the slave out of himself drop by drop" before "he finds that the blood coursing through his veins is no longer the blood of a slave, but that of a real human being." Part of the fascination of the

story of Anton Chekhov's life is to be found in watching him become "a real human being," free and courageous and not a man to be trifled with.

Certainly Chekhov's youthful low opinion of himself extended to his early writing. He was perfectly content to think himself a *pisaka*, the Russian word for scribbler with an extra dollop of contempt thrown in. He signed much of his early published work with various pseudonyms (Antosha Chekhonte being the one he used for his first published book), and referred to it as "literary excrement." The turning point in the revision of Chekhov's opinions about his own talent came not from within but from without—from, specifically, a letter of praise in 1886, when he was twenty-six years old, from Dmitry Grigorovich, a writer of the generation of Turgenev and Dostoevsky. In this letter Grigorovich wrote that Chekhov was the most talented writer of his generation and predicted great things for him if he would learn to husband his talent by working more slowly, carefully, and conscientiously. The effect on Chekhov of Grigorovich's letter was to make him, for the first time, take his own writing seriously.

Before long other people began to take Chekhov's writing seriously. One important figure among those who did was Alexei Suvorin, a literary man-of-all-work and publisher of the right-wing newspaper *New Times*. Suvorin sought Chekhov out as a contributor and, beginning in 1886, published a flood of his stories that were of a higher caliber than any he, Chekhov, had hitherto published. Simon Karlinsky claims that Suvorin was the decisive influence in launching Chekhov on his career as a serious writer, and the claim is entirely persuasive. The reason the claim needs to be asserted at all is that Suvorin's role in Chekhov's career and the friendship between the two men has been vastly diminished in the Soviet account of Chekhov's life. It will not do, in Soviet hagiography, for Anton Chekhov to have had a friend such as Alexei Suvorin, who was for most of his career pro-government and hence anathema to Russian

liberals; not exactly an honorable conservative's ideal either, Suvorin was a baiter of Poles and Finns and an anti-Semite, which put his newspaper smack on the wrong side during the Dreyfus Affair. Chekhov, who was convinced of Captain Dreyfus's innocence, dispensed with tact in telling Suvorin how repulsive he thought his paper's position on the Dreyfus Affair was. Yet that the two men could remain friends—and true friends, for many of Chekhov's best and most intimate letters were written to Suvorin—despite such strong disagreement was a testament to the strength of their feeling for each other.

But it also complicates the problem for those who wish to position Chekhov according to his views. Was he a man of the Left or of the Right? Did he tend toward optimism or pessimism in his writing? Was he the writer in whom Simon Karlinsky finds "unfailing humanity and compassion," or the writer in whom Lev Shestov found a "pitiless talent" and whose advice to humanity, as Shestov said, was to bang its head against the wall and then sleep the sleep of the brute. It is not so much a question of discovering a message in Chekhov. But it is a question, as Henry James, writing about Turgenev, put it when he noted: "The great question as to a poet or novelist is, how does he feel about life? What in the last analysis is his philosophy? This is the most interesting thing their works offer us. Details are interesting in proportion as they contribute to make it clear."

Chekhov, there is reason to believe, would not have agreed. In a letter to Suvorin, who complained about the inconclusiveness of a problem raised in one of his stories, Chekhov replied that solving problems was not the artist's job. Nor was "the artist meant to be a judge of his characters and what they say; his only job is to be an impartial witness . . . Drawing conclusions is up to the jury, that is, the readers." In this same letter there follows an astonishing statement for a writer to make: "It's about time that everyone who writes—especially genuine literary artists—admitted that in

this world you can't figure anything out." Chekhov was twenty-eight years old when he wrote that. (He only lived, recall, to forty-four, an unlucky age for literature, for it is the same age at which George Orwell and F. Scott Fitzgerald died.) Did he really believe it? There is no reason to think that he didn't believe it absolutely.

What is the price for believing that in this world you can't figure anything out? For Chekhov the man, it may not have come to much. Certainly, it did not constrain him from good works. It did not put him off wishing to see the conditions alleviated for the prisoners on Sakhalin Island; it did not stop him from building four schools for peasants during his lifetime; it did not restrain him from being passionately on the side of Zola in the Dreyfus Affair; it did not even prevent him from marrying, late in his life, even though no writer, with the exception of Strindberg, has held out in his writing less hope for marriage than Anton Chekhov, for the guttering and final extinguishing of the flame of love is one of the great Chekhovian subjects. No, if one were to judge Chekhov by his actions alone, he would seem a man who believed in education, justice, the family, and who held enlightened and not merely *bien pensant* views on most of the questions of his day; he would emerge from such a judgment as a strong liberal of the best type, not of the pusillanimous kind fearful of being caught on the wrong side such as Turgenev appears to have been, but a man of serious conviction who does what he can to relieve suffering and eliminate injustice, and who believes in the possibility of limited but nonetheless real progress.

Chekhov was not an angel, though he is sometimes made out to be all soul and with a heart of gold. Ronald Hingley wrote his *A New Life of Anton Chekhov* (1976), in my view the best biography of Chekhov, in partial reaction to the clichés about Chekhov's tenderness and sensitivity; and while he turns up evidence of Chekhov's evasiveness, his coldness, his occasional unreliability and social hypocrisy, he concludes that the result

of assembling Chekhov's defects "has been to provide a character reference more impressive than can come from those who degrade him with their mindless adulation." Believing that in this world you can't figure out anything did not make Chekhov a less decent man. The belief that one is living in a puzzling and indifferent universe might even increase one's sympathy and one's hatred of unnecessary brutality, and in Chekhov's case it actually appears to have done so.

But as a writer whose name is in contention for appearing among that small and sacred circle of literary artists of the greatest power, Chekhov's honest disbelief brought with it certain limitations—limitations that make him, as Philip Rahv once put it, "an artist of unmistakable originality, though not of the very first order." Compassionate Chekhov clearly was, and lyrical and often comic, too, but in the main he is a very dark writer, and admiration for him should not disguise that unarguable fact. Helplessness, hopelessness, misunderstanding, and defeat are chief among his themes. If love crops up in a Chekhov story, it is virtually certain to be mowed down by selfishness or insensitivity or staleness. Serious communication between two people is an impossibility; and in Chekhov's plays, although the conversation goes by the technical name of dialogue, more than half the time his characters are soliloquizing while other people who are not listening are in the same room. In Chekhov's writing, boredom hangs in the atmosphere, palpably there, a spiritual smog created by human inertia; in the story entitled "Uprooted" even a windmill is bored. Music is frequently playing, but usually off in another room; ". . . and then came emptiness, and the sense of the futility of life" is a characteristic Chekhovian line. "Why we live, why we suffer . . . Oh, if only we knew, if only we knew!" moans Olga at the close of *Three Sisters*.

Dark Chekhov undoubtedly is, but darkness, too, has its shades, and Chekhov worked in them all. Twilight was perhaps his favorite among them, for in Chekhov night has not yet—not quite—fallen, but it is com-

ing. One of Chekhov's many artistic innovations was that he was perhaps the first serious writer to take as one of his themes the malaise of modernity—the sense that something in life is awry, something is wrong, something is missing. “We’re not happy,” says the character Vershinin in *Three Sisters*, “and we can’t be happy: we only want happiness.” It is this element in Chekhov that makes him seem so modern. At the end of each of Chekhov’s major plays—*Ivanov*, *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*—one can almost sense Samuel Beckett waiting in the wing.

Not that Chekhov is merely Samuel Beckett with Russian cabbage soup, herring, and cucumbers added as props. He is much more than that; he is broader and deeper. His work is a triumph of tone, he was a master of moods. Verisimilitude came naturally to him. Whatever Chekhov writes, one feels, is true: there is no single Chekhov story in which even for a moment one thinks to say that this character doesn’t feel right, this situation seems false, life isn’t like that. He was a powerful social observer. Another literary line radiates out from Chekhov to Proust, who was born only eleven years after Chekhov. Proust remarked that “every social class has its pathology,” but Chekhov, in stories and plays that dealt with every social class from the peasantry to the nobility, had long before already demonstrated the accuracy of Proust’s remark.

Yet Chekhov’s writing fails to yield up its essence through conventional literary analysis. It won’t do with Chekhov to paraphrase a few of his stories, point out the symbolic significance of this or that, fill in the social background, offer a compact interpretation, and knock off for lunch at the faculty club. René Wellek, in the introduction to a useful collection of criticism about Chekhov, remarks, rightly, on the absence in his book of any extended criticism of Chekhov’s stories because “selecting a few [of these stories] would falsify Chekhov’s achievement.” Chekhov’s stories are not about good and evil; they have no heroes. With only rare exceptions is there anything resembling in-

trinsic drama building to a climax—more often, in fact, he descends to an anticlimax. Chekhov himself once told Ivan Bunin that the way to tell a story is to make it as brief as possible and then to lop off the beginning and the ending. (Writing stories without a beginning or an ending is a procedure since picked up by many contemporary writers in *The New Yorker* and elsewhere; the difficulty—it is, unfortunately, an insurmountable one—is that a writer of Chekhov’s quality is needed to supply the remaining middle.) Nor will it quite do to say that these stories represent “a slice of life,” a grossly inept metaphor, since life, as you may have noticed, is no pie.

There are no plots in Chekhov, and while there are characters in plenty, few of them are memorable in the way that characters in Dickens and Tolstoy and Proust are memorable. “Indeed,” wrote Virginia Woolf, “it is the soul that is the chief character in Russian fiction,” and, double indeed, it is true that the question of souls—lost souls, really—does hover over almost all of Chekhov’s pages. But the best account of what goes on in a Chekhov story is Conrad Aiken’s. Writing in 1921, reviewing one of the thirteen volumes of Chekhov stories translated into English by Constance Garnett,¹ Aiken notes that “Chekhov is more concerned with the effect of ‘actuality’ than with the ‘story’”—more concerned, that is, with effects than causes. Aiken continues:

His sensibilities were rich and of an immense range, had thrust their roots, one dares to think, almost as widely and deeply into life as Shakespeare’s: his understanding was unsurpassed, and if he falls short of the greatest of artists it is not for a lack of that faculty. No artist has known, by introspection, more “states of mind,” no artist has known better, by observation, what shapes they assume in talk or behavior.

1 Ecco Press has now brought out ten of the thirteen volumes of Chekhov short stories translated by Constance Garnett in a sturdy and clearly printed paperback edition.

What Conrad Aiken calls "states of mind" can as easily be called "condition of soul." This comes through even in translation. It is not easy to obtain a clear verdict on the quality of Chekhov's style in Russian from those for whom the Russian language is not, as it is for me, a locked gate. D.S. Mirsky, an aristocrat who was no great admirer of Chekhov, the grandson of a serf, and who wrote in reaction to the English idolization of Chekhov during World War I, refers to Chekhov's Russian as "another shortcoming," claiming that his language was colorless and without individuality. "He had no feeling for words," Mirsky wrote. "Of all Russian writers, he has the least to fear from the treachery of translators." Simon Karlinsky, on a very different hand, compares Chekhov's late prose to "the slow movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto in A major, K.488." Vladimir Nabokov, not exactly a man oblivious to style, said of Chekhov that "his literary style goes to parties clad in its everyday suit. Thus Chekhov is a good example to give when one tries to explain that a writer may be a perfect artist without being exceptionally vivid in his verbal technique or exceptionally preoccupied with the way his sentences curve Chekhov managed to convey an impression of artistic beauty far surpassing that of many writers who thought they knew what rich beautiful prose was. He did it by keeping all his words in the same dim light and of the same exact tint of gray, a tint between the color of an old fence and that of a low cloud. The variety of his moods, the flicker of his charming wit, the deeply artistic economy of characterization, the vivid detail, and the fade-out of human life—all the peculiar Chekhovian features—are enhanced by being suffused and surrounded by a faintly iridescent verbal haziness."

One is inclined to believe Karlinsky and Nabokov about Chekhov's Russian style, yet grant Mirsky his point about Chekhov having little to fear about betrayal from translators. Ronald Hingley's Oxford edition translation of Chekhov seems to me an improvement on Constance Garnett's, but

Garnett's reads decently, as does Avrahm Yarmolinsky's and Robert Payne's; I, you might say, have never read a Chekhov translation I didn't like. This is owing, along with the efforts of his translators, to Chekhov's talent, which always shines through: his penetrating analysis of character, his economical and often lyrical descriptions of landscape, his darting truths about human nature and national character ("The Russian loves recalling life, but he does not love living"), his accurate eye and nose for the look and feel and smell of exhausted provincial Russian towns, his really quite magical ability to insinuate a larger significance into even the most minor of incidents. All these qualities, which come across unmistakably in every translation of his work, Chekhov had in amplitude.

What Chekhov didn't have was a strong sense of form. This may seem a minor weakness, especially set beside his impressive strengths, but the absence of a sense of form may, in Chekhov's case, have been more than a mere technical problem. Why, for example, did Chekhov never write a novel? To ask the question is not akin to asking why a sprinter doesn't run a marathon, for Chekhov, early in his career, worked two years on a novel (to be entitled *Stories from the Lives of My Friends*) that he never completed. True, Chekhov once said, "It's much better as a rule to write short works than long ones: fewer pretensions and more success" Yet he once wrote to Dmitry Grigorovich, and the italics are his, "*I do not yet know how* to write long pieces." When he came to write at greater length—and such stories as "The Steppe," "In the Ravine," "Three Years," and "My Life" qualify, at least in length, as novellas—he feared that these longer stories sagged in the middle, which they often do. And Ronald Hingley notes that, as Chekhov begins to mature as an artist, "we find the more elaborate the plot of a given story is, the less effective it tends to be as a work of art." Chekhov himself was too much the highly self-conscious artist not to recognize his own aesthetic deficiencies.

At twenty-eight Chekhov wrote to Grigovich: "I still lack a political, religious and philosophical world view—I change it every month—and so I'll have to limit myself to descriptions of how my heroes love, marry, give birth, die, and how they speak." That same year he wrote to Alexei Suvorin: "The artist must pass judgment only on what he understands; his range is as limited as that of any other specialist—that's what I keep repeating and insisting upon. Anyone who says the artist's field is all answers and no questions has never done any writing or had any dealings with imagery." Despite the efforts of various people to pull him ideologically this way and that, Chekhov hewed to the view that it was not the writer's job to answer questions but to formulate them correctly. Of a now forgotten writer capable of writing such sentences as, "The greatest wonder of all is man himself, and we shall never tire of studying him," Chekhov said: "That's no view of life; that's a lollipop."

Not only did Chekhov eschew easy answers but he asked the hardest questions. In a story of 1898 entitled "A Doctor's Visit," a young doctor visits the daughter of a family who owns a large factory. The members of this wealthy family are unhappy; the fifteen hundred or so factory workers are living a barbarous life in unhealthy conditions; only the family's governess, "a stupid middle-aged lady in pince-nez" who eats sterlet and drinks Madeira during the doctor's visit, seems to be deriving any pleasure from these arrangements—all that misery so one insensitive woman may enjoy a rich lunch. Think what a crude writer like Maxim Gorky would have done with this material. Here is what Chekhov does as he has the young doctor sit upon some planks and building materials and contemplate the hideous factory building:

And he thought about the devil, in whom he did not believe, and he looked round at the two windows where the fires were gleaming. It seemed to him that out of those crimson eyes the devil himself was looking at him—that unknown force that had created the mutual

relation of the strong and the weak, that coarse blunder which one could never correct. The strong must hinder the weak from living—such was the law of Nature; but only in a newspaper article or in a school book was that intelligible and easily accepted. In the hotch-potch which was everyday life, in the tangle of trivialities out of which human relations were woven, it was no longer a law, but a logical absurdity, when the strong and the weak were both equally victims of their mutual relations, unwillingly submitting to some directing force, unknown, standing outside life, apart from man.

There are many moments—and the above passage is one of them—when one is glad that Chekhov had the courage of his lack of convictions.

But Chekhov knew there was a price to be paid for not having clear convictions and a strong sense of the meaning of life. If one hasn't something approaching a coherent world view, a sense of the interconnectedness of things and their ultimate meaning, form becomes a tricky matter. Plots become difficult when one hasn't a firm point to make. One can demonstrate life's complexity, observing in the process what recalcitrant material life offers to the writer and how it defies any generalization one can make about it. Chekhov often worked this vein—that of the artist who labors in the criticism of abstractions, never taking sides. "I'm far from an enthusiast for modernity," Chekhov wrote. "But one must be as objective and fair as possible. Bad as things may now be, uncongenial as the present is, the past was quite simply nauseating." One sees something of Chekhov as the artist criticizing abstractions in his many stories having to do with Russian peasants, for Chekhov's treatment of peasants, in its variousness, is a marvelous antidote to Turgenev's treacherily sentimentalizing of them and Tolstoy's fantastical idealizing of them. There is a great deal a writer can do without a coherent world view, and Chekhov came close to doing it all, but he knew, being very savvy about such things, that there was also a

great deal one could not do. Chekhov, in his subtlety, made the case against the writer without strong convictions or a coherent world view, and—though he dragged his generation of Russian writers into the indictment—it was finally a cogent indictment against himself. Writing to Suvorin, Chekhov laments:

We truly lack a certain something: if you lift up the skirts of our muse, all you see is a flat area. Keep in mind that the writers we call eternal or simply good, the writers who intoxicate us, have one highly important trait in common: they're moving toward something definite and beckon you to follow, and you feel with your entire being not only with your mind, that they have a certain goal, like the ghost of Hamlet's father, which had a motive for coming and stirring Hamlet's imagination . . . The best of them are realistic and describe life as it is, but because each line is saturated with the consciousness of its goal, you feel life as it should be in addition to life as it is, and you are captivated by it. But what about us? Us! We describe life as it is and stop dead right there.

And yet one does not think of Chekhov as a writer who can be clapped into the irons of generalizations about his generation, so greatly, as a figure in world literature, does he tower above any other Russian writer of his generation. Besides, among writers generationalism—the regular identification of oneself as part of a literary generation—is the last refuge of a pipsqueak, and Chekhov rarely went in for it. On the contrary, he did not even feel the need for solidarity among writers of his generation. “We can’t all think or feel in the same way,” he wrote to Ivan Leontyev. “We have different goals or no goals at all To help a colleague, to respect his person and his work, to refrain from gossiping about him and envying him, lying to him and acting hypocritically toward him, all this requires that one be not so much a young writer as simply a human being.” No, it is difficult to believe that Chekhov’s shortcomings can be explained by the plight of his generation.

In seeking an understanding of why Chekhov was so good a writer and yet why he just misses being among the small circle of great writers—that circle wherein reside such figures as Dante and Cervantes, Dickens and Tolstoy—one runs up against the single important mystery in Chekhov’s life: the mystery of how he, a physician always confident in his diagnoses, failed to diagnose his own tuberculosis, probably for fully a decade after he had had it. On March 22, 1897, while dining at the Hermitage restaurant in Moscow with Suvorin, Chekhov opened his mouth and blood gushed out, causing him to faint at the table. By then, according to Simon Karlinsky, Chekhov “had had tuberculosis for at least ten years without realizing it. All the expected symptoms were there: racking cough, night sweat, palpitations, spitting blood. He still refused to see another doctor about any of these symptoms, and when the possibility of tuberculosis was mentioned by others, he’d reply that if he had it, he would have been dead years ago.” Ronald Hingley, who dates the onset of Chekhov’s symptoms of tuberculosis to the same time as Karlinsky, remarks that Chekhov’s “sickness, with its intimations of ultimate mortality, declared itself on the threshold of a major change in his evolution [as an artist].” Hingley does not push this interesting point further.

I shall. We cannot, of course, know why Chekhov chose, against all the abundant evidence, to ignore or let slide to the back of his mind his knowledge of his apparent tuberculosis. But what does seem tempting to speculate upon is the possibility of Chekhov’s knowing that he had an almost certainly fatal disease and the effect of this upon his writing. I believe that Anton Chekhov knew he had tuberculosis, and knew it as early as the late 1880s, when his writing changed radically, becoming darker, more serious, denser, in every way better. I base this belief not alone on the fact that Chekhov, as a highly capable physician, could scarcely have missed knowing of it—stranger things have happened—but on the evidence of his writing.

Chekhov, I believe, wrote with knowledge of his own impending death in his bones. It is what gave him his gloom but his profundity, too. Chekhov's stories and plays are filled with people who recognize only too late that life is finite and that they, in their ignorance, have let it pass them by. "Why," asks the chief character in the story "Rothschild's Fiddle," after a misspent life, "do people always do what isn't needful?" Dr. Johnson said that the knowledge that one is to be hanged in a fortnight wonderfully concentrates the mind; the knowledge that one is carrying a fatal disease probably does something similar for the prose. The lyrical descriptions of Chekhov's landscapes, surely, read as if written by a man who knows he may not see them for much longer, and hence is all the more appreciative of them. Mayn't it also be that Chekhov's loftiness—his being above class affiliation, above politics ("Great writers and artists should take part in politics," he wrote during the days of the Dreyfus Affair, "only as a defense against politics"), above taking positions generally—was owing to his foreknowledge of his shortened life? After all, if one knows one's end is near, all such things must seem pretty small potatoes. As a character in Chekhov's story "Gooseberries" puts it: "There ought to be behind the door of every happy, contented man some one standing with a hammer continually reminding him with a tap that there are unhappy people; that however happy he may be, life will show him her laws sooner or later, trouble will come for him—disease, poverty, losses, and no one will see or hear, just as now he neither sees nor hears others."

If I am correct about Chekhov's knowing of his own early death, and if that knowledge gave his work a new depth and a special perspective, such knowledge did not permit him to accept any more readily second-hand answers to life's final mysteries. His own rather arbitrary illness could only have heightened his sense of these mysteries. No ready solutions were at hand. Religion, though he respected it in others, was impossible for him. Science, too, was a cul-de-sac; as the principal character in his story "On the Road" remarks, "The trouble is that every science has a beginning but not an end" In one of the darkest of Chekhov's tales, "A Dreary Story," a famous professor of medicine who senses his own death is near, realizes that he hasn't a theory of life, or "what my philosophic colleagues call a general idea." When he is beseeched by the young woman who is his most brilliant student at a time of crisis in her life for a reason to go on living, the professor, in one of the saddest lines in literature, has to say, "I don't know."

"I don't know" is what Chekhov, in his profound honesty, says to us, his readers. When one recognizes how ardently Chekhov sought to know, how the efforts of his prodigious art were all bent toward the effort of knowing, one has to admire all the more the iron integrity behind such honesty, even if it made him, in the view of a Tolstoy, who felt that he did know, "worse even than Shakespeare." For the truth is that one has to strain very hard to think of a writer who has come after Anton Chekhov of whom one can confidently say, "better even than Chekhov."

Making a spectacle of architecture on PBS

by Roger Kimball

Devotees of public television will have noticed a new item on its menu of cultural delicacies these past weeks. In addition to the usual fare of romanticized Dickens, Austen, colonial India, and the other literary and historical subjects that have provided the staple for its tastefully served-up “dramatizations,” we are now being offered romanticized architecture—also “dramatized,” to be sure, and certainly “served up,” though perhaps not quite so tastefully as one has come to expect from the programs that the Public Broadcasting Service has imported from the BBC. What we have, in short, is *Pride of Place: Building the American Dream*, an eight-part series on American architecture that is sponsored by Mobil Oil and scheduled to air weekly through the middle of May.

Our host for *Pride of Place* is the New York architect Robert A. M. Stern, a Professor of Architecture at Columbia University and Director of Columbia’s Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture. Mr. Stern narrates the series, accompanying the television cameramen to more than one hundred locations across the country, from the ghettos of the South Bronx to the gaudy, stage-set splendors of San Simeon, William Randolph Hearst’s “dream house” in California. Mr. Stern’s tour of American architecture includes cities, campuses, resorts, suburbs, parks, and reconstructed villages like Williamsburg, Virginia, as well as individual buildings and

monuments. All in all, he undertakes an ambitious itinerary that is intended to lend credibility to the series’ double billing as both a documentary and a “personal view” of its subject.

“Personal” the series surely is—often to the point of idiosyncrasy. Indeed, for anyone who has sat through all eight episodes of *Pride of Place* in three days, as this writer has, there can be no doubt that it offers the viewer abundant evidence of Mr. Stern’s opinions about the triumphs and failures of American architecture, including his speculations about where modern architecture went wrong and his assessment of the most pressing challenges facing contemporary architectural practice. But does *Pride of Place* also count as a “documentary” in any recognized sense of the word? Does it present us with anything like a straightforward, historically accurate account of the distinctive heritage and achievements of American architecture? Does it, at bottom, really even address itself primarily to matters of architectural interest? These are the questions one finds oneself asking again and again when contemplating *Pride of Place*.

Such questions are also provoked by the book published to accompany the series. Written by Mr. Stern with two associates, Thomas Mellins and Raymond Gastil, the book *Pride of Place* is a three-hundred-odd-page, copiously illustrated volume that faithfully reproduces the “personal view” of American architecture that Mr. Stern has

provided for the PBS series.¹ The chief difference between the television series and the book is that in the former Mr. Stern interrupts his narrative once or twice an episode for a prearranged chat with a fellow architect or architectural writer about the topic at hand. Altogether, there are eighteen guests on *Pride of Place*, including such well-known figures as the architects Philip Johnson, Cesar Pelli, Peter Eisenman, Morris Lapidus, and Leon Krier, the historians Vincent Scully, Gwendolyn Wright, and Charles Jencks, and the journalist Paul Goldberger. These exchanges, which range from arcane speculations about architectural “space” to Philip Johnson’s reminiscences about his cousin Theodate Pope Riddle (one of America’s first women architects), would seem to be intended to impart an air of authority and credibility to the series—that, and perhaps also to add a touch of human interest to Mr. Stern’s soliloquizing.

The interludes vary considerably in theme, too, from Morris Lapidus’s musings about what the Mayan Indians might have built had they had our decorative resources to Peter Eisenman’s misty “philosophical” observations about his attempt to “destabilize the notion of home.” One of the founders of the now defunct theoretical architecture journal *Oppositions*, Mr. Eisenman is famous for abstruse, often polemical pronouncements that are full of the rhetoric of semiotics. He was comparatively straightforward for the television cameras, however, even if, like several other guests on *Pride of Place*, he liked to pretend that architecture is best understood as a “text.” Mr. Stern, as *au courant* as anyone about such matters, likes to think of architecture as a text as well, though he did confide in his book that it was not until he went to graduate school at Yale that he “began to understand . . . that architecture is a narrative art, and that architectural style is analogous to poetic diction.” It was sometimes easy to forget, watching

Pride of Place, that architecture primarily has to do with building buildings—real buildings, ones that we live and work in, not ones that we read or ponder abstractly.

It has hardly been necessary to tune into PBS, let alone to turn the pages of Mr. Stern’s companion volume, to know something about *Pride of Place*. Sponsored *in toto* by Mobil, the series has been the subject of the kind of aggressive advertising that is usually reserved for a big-budget Hollywood movie or Broadway show. In New York City, for example, one can hardly walk down the street without encountering a clump of posters proclaiming *Pride of Place*, and the magazines and journals here have likewise been full of notices for the show. The spate of advertising in *The New York Times* culminated just before the series began airing at the end of March in an arresting two-page spread, featuring the postmodernist *Pride of Place* logo and a précis of each episode. There was also a screening of the first episode early in March at the State Department in Washington, D.C., followed by a lavish reception in the recently redone diplomatic reception rooms on the top floor of the building. This was not your usual cheese-and-crackers-and-cheap-white-wine affair, but a buffet feast for several hundred people replete with champagne and open bar, suckling pig, and—to reinforce the ambiance of culture—a string quartet discreetly dispensing Vivaldi in the corner. One couldn’t but wonder how much all this cost—eight hour-long television episodes, many of which involved a generous use of aerial photography, ubiquitous advertising, the reception—but Mobil declined to reveal the budget for this latest example of tax-exempt educational programming.

What were we actually shown after all this promotion? Did it merit the advertising, the champagne, the suckling pig? Unfortunately, the answer is “no.” No matter how one looks at it—as video documentary, as architectural history, as social history, even as television entertainment—*Pride of Place* is

1 *Pride of Place: Building the American Dream*, Houghton Mifflin/American Heritage, 344 pages, \$34.95.

a shambles. Even before Mr. Stern makes his first appearance on the screen one knows—or rather hears—that something is terribly wrong. The dreadful, and dreadfully manipulative, music leaves no doubt that we are in for something spurious. The music was composed by Carl Davis, currently the conductor for the Bournemouth Pops Symphony Orchestra and composer of the music for various television series, such as *The World at War*, *Churchill—The Wilderness Years*, and the Mobil-sponsored series *Praying Mantis*, as well as for the film *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. For *Pride of Place*, Mr. Davis's music features the strains of sweet nostalgia—"Home Sweet Home" plays with unbearable frequency—but is capable of achieving the mock-heroic and pop-apocalyptic when the occasion arises. And arise it does—again and again and again.

But corny as the music is, it probably provides the series with its only semblance of dramatic tension or show-business flair. And in relation to Mr. Stern's on-camera performance, the music is also responsible for a good deal of the series' unintended humor. While the music is alternately bathetic and absurdly sentimental, Mr. Stern is consistently, comically wooden. His voice is reedy and unpleasantly high-pitched; his delivery is uncertain; and the nervous staccato hand movements that accompany his every word rob even his most heartfelt pronouncements of grace. Then, too, there is Mr. Stern's manner. He tends to maintain a somewhat glassy, far-off expression—the result, perhaps, of being unable to take his eyes off the teleprompter—and an incessant smile that can be most generously described as unpersuasive. Mr. Stern performs so poorly on camera that one can only wonder why he was allowed to narrate the series. Didn't the producers—who are, after all, professionally concerned with such matters—recognize that they had failed utterly to come up with an American Kenneth Clark? In this respect, considered simply as an actor, Mr. Stern is far less compelling than many of his guests—than Jacqueline Robertson, for example, the dean of the

architecture school at the University of Virginia, who joins Mr. Stern in the first episode at Monticello and whose mellifluous voice and dignified stage presence are in marked contrast to his host's efforts.

On the other hand, it must be said that Mr. Stern does not enjoy particularly good directing. For one thing, Murray Grigor, who directed and co-produced *Pride of Place* and whose film credits include *The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright* (1983), has what one might call a Mediterranean sense of pace. Things go *slowly* in *Pride of Place*. Throughout the series, but especially in the later episodes, there is an extraordinary quantity of tedious filler, little of it having anything to do with architecture. There are long, long pans across innumerable sunlit fields and endless façades, lingering shots of soldiers marching, of children playing in the grass, of Mr. Stern driving a red convertible along the highways and byways of America. Though much of this contributes to the series' moments of unintended comedy, it does not help to enliven Mr. Stern's performance. Nor does the glibly inept cinematography come to his aid. On the contrary, as often as not it undercuts or obscures the very points he tries to make, showing fragments of a building when the entire structure is called for, zooming in on irrelevant details, offering spectacular aerial views that tell us nothing about the buildings as experienced by the people who use them. It is a rare moment indeed when one can glean any sense of a building as an architectural whole. If Mr. Stern painstakingly describes the inviting sense of vertical flow that a grand staircase communicates, we can expect the camera to pan ever so slowly, ever so horizontally, across the middle of the stair. Architecture is notoriously difficult to present effectively on film, but it helps if the cinematographer makes some effort to follow the script.

The quality of the production and performances in any television series is always an important ingredient in its success, and the poor quality of both in *Pride of Place* is a

serious handicap. But the real problem with *Pride of Place* is its failure as an exercise in architectural history. In part, this is simply a failure of communication. Each of the episodes contains references to a good many unexplained architectural terms and unidentified architectural figures. “Campanile” is one of Mr. Stern’s favorite words—he uses it to refer not only to a bell tower but also to just about any slender vertical structure—but he never bothers to explain it, nor does he explain the score of other more or less technical terms that he and his guests use. Again, Mr. Stern gives us an elaborate account of who Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was—Mies is one of the series’ arch-villains, so it is important that we know just who we are dealing with; but he leaves many lesser-known architects—Louis Kahn, for example, who figures prominently in his first episode—barely identified. One is reminded that public television, which was launched as “educational television,” now seems to have abandoned any serious didactic aspiration whatsoever.

This is not to say that *Pride of Place* is too specialized or too full of architectural detail and the particulars of architectural history. Quite the contrary. While Mr. Stern displays and discusses innumerable buildings, we do not come away from the series having been instructed about architecture; rather, we feel that we’ve witnessed a particularly ambitious set of home movies or a travelogue. The book leaves one with an analogous feeling. I do not, for example, remember seeing a single architectural plan in the entire eight episodes. Nor does Mr. Stern take the trouble to discuss building types, architectural structure, or the relation of style to structure. Yet these are fundamental elements of architectural study, without which any discussion of the subject must lack intellectual substance.

Instead of architectural analysis, *Pride of Place* gives us a *House & Garden* version of American architecture. Everything is reduced to surface, façade, decoration, local color—the couture of architecture. Mr. Stern’s discussion of Daniel Burnham’s Flatiron Building (1902) at Twenty-third Street and Fifth

Avenue in New York is a typical case. Noting that the windy open spaces north of the building’s wedge-shaped front would “bare the ankles of the fashionable women on Fifth Avenue and Twenty-third Street,” he points out that “The legend is that police called out ‘twenty-three skidoo’ to shoo away the male gawkers.” In the television episode, we even get an animated short about the phrase. And this is about all we take away from *Pride of Place* about the Flatiron Building, one of the great early skyscrapers. All this has nothing to do with architecture, of course, but it is exactly the kind of trivia that pervades the series. Also characteristic is the disproportionate amount of time Mr. Stern spends wandering through the houses of the very rich: the “cottages” at Newport, Rhode Island, Hearst’s San Simeon, James Deering’s Vizcaya in Biscayne Bay, Florida, Isabella Stewart Gardner’s Fenway Court, Boston, and so on. These are the places that have clearly captured Mr. Stern’s imagination, not because they are of compelling architectural interest—in fact, they belong more to the history of conspicuous consumption than to the history of architecture—but because of their eccentricity, their aura of wealth and power, their snob appeal, and not least because of their campy extravagance, which gives Mr. Stern’s penchant for coy irony full rein.

In order to understand what is really at stake in *Pride of Place*, however, it is necessary to look more closely at the “personal view” of American architecture that informs it. It is here that the series fails most conspicuously. At the center of that “personal view” is Mr. Stern’s presumption that his approach to architecture constitutes a recovery of architectural tradition and history. His pose as a champion of history and tradition is suggested already in the title of his first, and in many respects his best, episode, “The Search for a Usable Past.” Evoking the spirit of Van Wyck Brooks, whose notion of a “usable past” he appropriates, Mr. Stern here sets out the basic terms of his view of architecture and touches upon most of the

themes that will occupy him in succeeding episodes.

According to Mr. Stern, the “crucial issue” facing American architecture today is its relationship to the past. Only if it retains a living bond with its past achievements can architecture hope to transcend its merely utilitarian tasks and “build a dream.” Yet Mr. Stern points out that American architecture, lacking an indigenous tradition, had to fashion a tradition for itself out of a wide range of disparate elements; where Europe was born to its history and an architectural tradition, America in an important sense has always had to concoct its tradition, “inventing and reinventing” the past. Thus Mr. Stern calls for an architecture that blends “pragmatism and myth.” Looking back to his youth in Brooklyn, he contrasts the fancifully ornamented skyscrapers of the Twenties and Thirties with the cooler, sparser modernist architecture of the Fifties and Sixties. For him, these later buildings betrayed the “dream” that promised to lift architecture from the realm of engineering to the realm of art; in reacting against historicism, modernist architecture showed itself to be enslaved to an ethic of functionality that “fiercely negated the past in favor of a single-minded orientation to the present.” Modernism, according to Mr. Stern, abandoned the search for a usable past.

Somewhere in the midst of this tale of paradise lost, as Mr. Stern castigates the “insensitive, uniform boxes” of modernist architecture, the camera shifts abruptly from cheerful, long-distance shots of old New York skyscrapers and begins panning slowly across the glass façades of half a dozen modernist buildings. At the same time, the soundtrack, previously full of elevating arpeggios and trills, begins intoning a gloomy threnody. The entire sequence epitomizes the grossly manipulative quality of Mr. Stern’s presentation. Moreover, Mr. Stern makes it clear that for him modernism’s “fierceness” is not confined to its negative attitude toward the past; it also has dire consequence for one’s social conscience. In one of his more extraordinary observations, he

recalls his student days, when modernism was triumphant: “A new postwar world had dawned, I was reminded, and just as I must learn to love the bomb—or at least live with it—I must learn to love an architecture that exalted function and structural technique as the determinants of significant form.” For Mr. Stern, it would seem, modernist architecture is not merely aesthetically displeasing, it has an insidious connection with instruments of death and destruction.

This, of course, is nonsense. There is no analogy between modernist architecture and atomic weapons whatsoever. Indeed, the chief interest of Mr. Stern’s suggestion to the contrary is the cast of mind it betrays. And in this regard it may also be worth mentioning Mr. Stern’s description of Mt. Vernon as “the Lenin’s tomb of American architecture,” a description that speaks volumes about Mr. Stern’s sensitivity to history and tradition. This remark is noteworthy, too, because *Pride of Place* bills itself in part as a celebration of the American democratic tradition—a fact that no doubt explains why the State Department would have offered its premises for a screening and reception. Perhaps the best summary of Mr. Stern’s thinking about these matters is to be found in his peroration. “The American dream has not been a blind leap into the future but a determined march,” Mr. Stern rousingly concludes at the end of *Pride of Place*:

at our best, our march forward has been directed by the lessons of what went before, and only when we have broken our contract with the past, with our best sense of what is noble and right, have we stumbled: we stumbled in the South Bronx of our inner cities; we stumbled in Vietnam. When we stumble again, let us hope we do not fall down once and for all. Like Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, I believe “in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us.” It eluded us at the dawn of our Republic, it eludes us now, “but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . And one fine morning—

"So we beat on, boats against the current,
borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Now we see that on top of everything else modernism is implicated in the decline of the South Bronx and in the Vietnam War. It is here, perhaps, in Mr. Stern's idolization of the pathetic figure of Fitzgerald's Gatsby—a character whose doomed pursuit of the "orgiastic future" rests upon a total fabrication of the past—that we have the real key to the conception of "history and tradition" as well as the motivating "dream" that informs *Pride of Place*.

But the main point of Mr. Stern's criticisms of modernism—the end to which the whole of *Pride of Place* strives—is to clear the way for the triumph of postmodernism. In short, his guiding theme is that modernist architecture was an aberration, an ahistorical rupture in American architectural history that is only now being repaired by the ascendancy of postmodernism. Finally, after the depredations of modernism, "the corporate world has come around again," Mr. Stern tells us; finally American architecture has found spokesmen for tradition and history in architects like Philip Johnson, Michael Graves, and Robert Venturi. Buildings like Johnson and Burgee's AT&T Building (described as the first New York skyscraper in forty years "to inhabit its height proudly") or PPG Place, Johnson and Burgee's "neo-Gothic" glass complex in Pittsburgh, are said by Mr. Stern to have "rekindled the confident spirit of the 1920s."

The ironies to be found in this "personal view" of the history of American architecture are no doubt endless. But the greatest irony is to be found in Mr. Stern's essentially campy posture as a champion of history and tradition. Throughout *Pride of Place*, he shows himself to be utterly incapable of distinguishing between real history and a superficial parody of history. Mr. Stern's romanticized version of history, like the versions of the past offered by the BBC in its dramatizations of novels and historical events, wraps the past in a glaze of nostalgia.

Thus it turns out that Mr. Stern has a good reason for insisting that history and tradition in American architecture are "invented and reinvented," for his handling of history in *Pride of Place* shows that his real talents are in the realm of fantasy, not historical exposition. The picture of American architecture that he peddles in *Pride of Place* is woefully irresponsible when it comes to the historical record. The entire series rests on a systematic distortion of the character and achievements of modernist architecture. For while it is true that modernist architecture challenged the *ethos* of nineteenth-century historicism, to conclude that modernism is therefore anti-historical or anti-traditional is worse than simplistic; it is a blatant misrepresentation. As the German writer Wolf Tegethoff observes,

Contrary to widespread opinion, in part deliberately promoted for purposes of propaganda, modern architecture did not make a break with history, but consciously adopted its achievements and sought to build upon them. Behind the presumed fundamentally new beginning that took place in the years just before and immediately after the First World War there ran uninterrupted strands of development that clearly exhibit this historical continuity.²

In this connection, one need think only of the deep and lasting influence of neo-classicism, especially of Karl Friedrich Schinkel, on modernism, an influence that Colin Rowe investigated in some detail as long ago as the late Forties.³

In fact, Mr. Stern's animus against modernism and its chief proponents completely undermines his analysis of its accomplishments. This is perhaps most amusingly evi-

2 Mies van der Rohe: *The Villas and Country Houses* (The Museum of Modern Art, 1985), p. 28.

3 See especially "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa," "Mannerism and Modern Architecture," and "Neo-Classicisim' and Modern Architecture I," which have lately been collected in *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (MIT, 1976).

dent in Mr. Stern's rhetoric and diction, which is not what one would call fastidious. Constrained to offer grudging praise for Mies's Seagram Building, because of the near universal admiration it has occasioned, Mr. Stern describes its design as "mordant." "Mordant," one wants to remind the Director of the Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture, means "bitingly sarcastic." What can it mean to describe the design of the Seagram Building—or any building, for that matter—as "mordant"? It means nothing at all, I'm afraid, though perhaps it does allow Mr. Stern to say one thing while suggesting its opposite. Whether he is conscious of this is hard to say, but he indulges in this sort of thing a lot, at times resorting to out-and-out contradiction. Thus, for example, he insists on one page that Mies "rejected history" and tradition but admits on another that "he struggled to create an order based on the steel I-beam that could compare with the traditional orders of Classicism." Often, in fact, Mr. Stern speaks truer than he means to, as when he lauds Robert Venturi's fanciful buildings at Princeton University, yet concludes by noting that "Venturi and his partners look at the past with a twisted smile," or when, in the midst of fulsome praise, he observes that the details at Michael Graves's new library at San Juan Capistrano constitute "an almost embarrassing climax of cuteness."

Furthermore, Mr. Stern's version of American architectural history is ludicrously anachronistic, interpreting every ornamental flourish from Colonial times on down as a prelude to postmodernism. Among the more irritating specimens of this tendency was Mr. Stern's description of Jefferson in terms that made him out to be, as it were, a postmodernist before his time. Jefferson, clearly one of Mr. Stern's heroes, was called upon to lend authority to all manner of folly. Thus Mr. Stern refers to Philip Johnson's famous Glass House as "a Modernist version of Jefferson's ideal," "an industrial age Monticello." In one of his many reflections about San Simeon, he writes that "Hearst's

restless intelligence and obsessive nature resulted in an approach to building reminiscent of Jefferson's." One notes in passing that Philip Johnson's version of Miesian modernism is exempted from the criticism that Mr. Stern directs against Mies himself, perhaps because in Johnson's hands Mies's rigorous proportioning and use of materials have been abandoned for the sake of achieving a certain "look." But can Mr. Stern really believe that there is a Jeffersonian spirit animating the Glass House and San Simeon? Can there be any three buildings in all of American architectural history that have less in common than Monticello, the Glass House, and San Simeon?

The truth is that what we see throughout *Pride of Place* is the same arbitrary, deeply ahistorical approach to history and tradition that characterizes postmodernism itself. This approach is based on the belief that applying a Chippendale top or Egyptoid ornamentation to an essentially modernist skyscraper somehow represents a genuine recovery of history or tradition. History, from this point of view, is fundamentally a matter of packaging, decoration, and façade. Thus, after berating modernism, *Pride of Place* cuts without warning to Plimoth Plantation to give us a lecture in architecture as it should be. We watch as actors, in period costume, assemble the frame of a house. It is all very picturesque and romantic, especially the close-up shots of one of the men pounding the apparently hand-carved tenons into the mortises. The beams themselves, however, are awfully smooth—indeed, they are almost certainly machine-finished, a fact that gives the lie to the whole schmaltzy sequence and typifies the dishonest approach to tradition and history that Mr. Stern traffics in.

A similar pretense is at work in Mr. Stern's frequent invocation of "myth." He would have us believe that postmodernist architecture has helped put our culture back in touch with the dimension of myth, tradition, and "dreaming" that the rationalistic imperatives of modernism abjured. One hears such talk about "the recovery of myth" and the like a good deal these days, of

course, though in truth it is rarely more than a rhetorical gesture. As Jacques Maritain has pointed out, myths in the sense Mr. Stern intends "have no force except through the faith man has in them. It is essential to them to be believed in."⁴ But postmodernism's attachment to myth is purely superficial; it toys with myth the way it toys with historical ornamentation, arbitrarily appropriating first this, then that element or motif. At bottom, it remains as firmly rooted in the modern, technological world as the strictest Miesian, all the while refusing to acknowledge the implications of this contradiction. Never is there any question of belief, of authenticity; "myth" for postmodernism, like "history," is little more than a kind of costume, a kind of mask it dons in order to disguise its essentially modernist underpinnings and to achieve an aura of tradition.

Nevertheless, it is precisely postmodernism's talk of "history," of "tradition," of "myth" that gives it its great appeal at the present time. For though our culture is deeply shaped by science and technology and the essentially rationalized approach to the world that they imply, there remains a great nostalgia for something like a "mythic" view of the world. Postmodernism answers to that nostalgia, glibly dispensing the *illusion* of myth, the *appearance* of tradition, the *look* of history without bothering to involve itself in any of the fundamental commitments that genuine myth, tradition, or historical awareness would entail. Mr. Stern is only too happy to play this game, to speak grandly of recent architecture's resuscitation of history and mythic ambitions and, in the same vein, to import clichéd religious terminology in order to invest his discussion with an aura of spirituality and high purpose. Houses are "temples" for Mr. Stern, as are museums, as is even the Chrysler Building, and art is a sacred endeavor that consecrates our secular world. He goes on like this wherever possible, most

egregiously, perhaps, in his discussion of the Pennsylvania Academy of Art and its "heavenly treasures." One can only wonder what terms Mr. Stern would use to describe a real temple or church—if indeed the distinction has any meaning for him.

A good deal of Mr. Stern's approach comes together in his discussion of resort architecture, "Resorts: Paradise Regained." He devotes an entire episode to the subject ostensibly because resorts have inspired significant architecture in this country, but really, or so it seems, because it gives him another opportunity to wallow in a world of fantasy underwritten by wealth, caprice, and eccentricity. It also allows him to offer us further extraordinary analogies, some of which are every bit as wonderful as his reference to the atomic bomb in the midst of his discussion of modernism. "Just as one can see normally buttoned-down men and women reveal their every physical and psychological nuance during a summer afternoon at the beach," Mr. Stern writes, "one can see national architecture preferences, free at last from so many economic and societal constraints, intensely expressed in resort architecture." But *do* men and women "reveal their every physical and psychological nuance during a summer afternoon at the beach"? Of course they don't. And can "national architectural preferences" really be said to express themselves in any important sense in resort architecture? Of course not.

Still, it is worth pausing over Mr. Stern's assessment of resort architecture; for while his discussion often borders on the absurd, it does provide a splendid example of the sensibility that characterizes *Pride of Place*. "The greatest American resorts have gone beyond conventional exercises in escape," writes Mr. Stern;

resorts have functioned as stage sets upon which the nation has enacted a mythic version of its past Moreover, Americans have learned to live together in a community at their resorts. In a democracy where strict social traditions and codes of behavior do not apply, the resort has provided an image of

4 *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Meridian, 1974), p. 318.

communitarian stability that the “real” world fails to provide. Whether at a grand hotel, a summer colony, or a theme village, Americans on holiday have dealt themselves strong lessons in social behavior, often under the benignly dictatorial hand of a hotelier or self-appointed tastemaker.

What are we to make of this passage? Leaving to one side the unexceptionable suggestion that American resorts have “gone beyond conventional exercises in escape,” is there a single assertion here that can stand without qualification? We have already discussed Mr. Stern’s invocation of the “mythic past.” Here we can see that his notion of “community” is hardly more substantial. And the idea that the resort provides democracy with its ideal image of community is not simply false, it is obscene. At best, the resort can be seen as an ironic parody of a genuine community—though it is indicative of Mr. Stern’s entire presentation that any distinction between an ideal and its caricature is lost. (Consider, in this regard, the arch quotation marks around the word “real” in the above passage—exactly what reality is Mr. Stern calling into question?)

At the center of Mr. Stern’s discussion of resorts is the work of the Russian-born architect Morris Lapidus, whose best-known creation to date is probably the Hotel Fontainebleau (1954) on Miami Beach and whose genius for expensive kitsch allowed him, in Mr. Stern’s words, to fashion “a new aesthetic identity for Miami.” Mr. Stern is absolutely correct when he notes that “Lapidus invented a vision of an architectural past that never existed” and describes him as a “designer of permanent stage sets.” But I hardly see that this makes his work “some of the most original and inventive architecture produced in this country,” as Mr. Stern puts it. In fact, Mr. Lapidus’s creations for Miami Beach, like most “resort architecture,” are the trashiest concoctions, utterly without aesthetic or architectural merit. Their “elegance” is based on overblown, pseudo-historical pastiche combined with lots of lights and shiny surfaces. And the truth is

that the works of Mr. Lapidus and his ilk are perfect for *Pride of Place* because they accord so completely with Mr. Stern’s “personal view” of architectural history as a kind of “stage set” to be plundered in order to invest fundamentally modern structures with the patina of history and tradition.

The essential clue to the attitude behind this “new aesthetic identity” was aptly summed up by Mr. Lapidus himself when he observed:

“People are looking for illusions; they don’t want the world’s realities . . . Where are their tastes formulated? Do they study it in school? Do they go to museums? Do they travel in Europe? Only one place—the movies. They go to the movies. The hell with everything else.”

“People are looking for illusions”—at bottom, that is the unacknowledged motto of postmodernism. Mr. Lapidus also displays great insight when he invokes the movies in this context. For it is the movies, not architecture, that provide Mr. Stern with his one stable cultural reference point throughout *Pride of Place*. He begins the series by telling us that New York in the Twenties was his “personal Oz,” and there follow references to (and often clips from) all manner of movies and television shows: the main house in *Dallas* is adduced as an example of architecture inspired by Mt. Vernon; bits of *Citizen Kane* are shown during his discussion of San Simeon, *King Kong* when he discusses the Empire State Building; James Gamble Rogers is said to have “used architecture to provide Yale with a kind of WASP version of *Roots*”; and there are also references to *Goldfinger*, *Superman*, *High Noon*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *Christmas in Connecticut*, Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, and on and on. Indeed, it seems at times that Mr. Stern can hardly make a point without bringing in a movie.

For example, Charlie Chaplin apparently provided Mr. Stern with a touchstone for understanding modernist architecture. “Mies willingly condemned architecture to an existential world without past or future,” Mr. Stern tells us.

But however rooted in the concrete and the practical, the technology that Mies deified was itself not an eternal truth but a variable, a constantly evolving standard. Mies's escape from the past into the technological present in time became subject to history as well, taking on, in less than half a century, a dream-like, almost quaint quality, evoking the nostalgia for the machine age one now feels when watching Charlie Chaplin's 1936 film *Modern Times*.

Le Corbusier, too, reminds Mr. Stern of *Modern Times*:

Le Corbusier sketched a world relentlessly locked into a shadowless present. His dream encased the bureaucrats of business and commerce in huge unornamented and uniform office blocks, which he dubbed "Cartesian" out of respect for the French logician. Le Corbusier's towers were to be reserved for the new managerial elite, who after their working day traveled high-speed roadways to be decanted into stacked duplexes around the edges of the park. Like his contemporary T.S. Eliot, Le Corbusier emulated this managerial elite, transforming himself into the bowler-hatted man in the black suit that Charlie Chaplin would parody.

But was Le Corbusier's world "locked into a shadowless present"? Was Descartes a "logician"? Is it fair to say that Le Corbusier's buildings were conceived for "the new managerial elite"? What about *Unité d'Habitation*, his widely admired apartment house in Marseilles? And T.S. Eliot—well, here Mr. Stern is once again indulging in the cheapest of cultural stereotypes.

After that initial screening of the first episode of *Pride of Place* in Washington, Herbert Schmetz, Mobil's vice-president for public affairs, stood up to assure us that what we had just witnessed was a serious exploration of cultural and architectural themes, not to be confused with such manipulative

television drivel as *Lifestyles of the Rich and the Famous*. But the sad truth is that *Pride of Place* has virtually nothing to do with architecture or high culture and almost everything to do with "lifestyle." There is no attempt to come to terms with important architectural or aesthetic issues, or even to present an accurate and comprehensible picture of architectural history. Of critical judgment there is not a trace—Disneyland, San Simeon, Monticello, Newport: so long as its not modernist, it's all one to Robert Stern. Instead of a thoughtful, critically discriminating presentation of American architecture, we are given picture-postcard views of places and buildings—especially the houses and grounds of the rich and powerful—intermixed with Mr. Stern's cheerleading for postmodernism.

It seems entirely appropriate, then, that near the end of the last episode of *Pride of Place* we should see Mr. Stern and the utopian architect Leon Krier being driven around Williamsburg, Virginia, in a horse-drawn carriage and agreeing that in many respects the reconstructed Colonial village represents the best hope for the "future" of American architecture. Whatever virtues Williamsburg may have as an example of historic preservation, it has nothing to contribute to the central architectural problems of our time. But considered as an exercise in nostalgia, as a cosmetic rehabilitation of days gone by, it stands as a perfect symbol of Mr. Stern's postmodernist conception of history and tradition. "At Williamsburg," writes Mr. Stern, "one can simultaneously escape into history and escape from it." Williamsburg also stands as a perfect symbol for the cultural vision of public television in this country. Instead of the BBC's romantic tales of the British Raj, we get Professor Stern going around a reconstructed Colonial village in a horse-drawn carriage talking about the future of American architecture. If *Pride of Place* can be considered "educational" at all, it is only in a negative, admonitory sense. It is, alas, a cautionary tale.

Poems *by Louis Simpson & Paul Mariani*

Sea of grass

For Jimmy Ernst

If you're a Jew and want to know
which transport your mother was on,
the French railroads have a list.
Jimmy showed me the name of his:
"Lou Straus-Ernst . . . Transport 76."

One of those who made the journey
and survived, gave an account:
"Seventy would be put in a boxcar.
There would be a long wait
while the train was boarded up.
Then three days' travel east . . .
paper mattresses on the floor
for the sick, bare boards for the rest.
Many did not survive."

*

At Auschwitz shortly before the end
one had seen her: "A woman totally exhausted,
half lying, half leaning against a wall,
warming herself in the last rays of a dying sun."

And still we believe in loving-kindness . . .
some even believe there's a God.
This is a mystery, *ein Rätsel*
God himself could not explain.

*

A few minutes' walk from the house
where I live, there's a beach,
a brown strip of sand
lined with tide-wrack and litter . . .
boards, plastic bottles
and, at the water's edge, green reeds.

"Sea of Grass" Jimmy called it.
Every time I come here I think of him
and his painting.

"Work!
God wants you to," said Flaubert.

There they are every summer
just as he painted them,
growing up again . . . a hedge
of stems and leaves standing motionless.

Blue water, and a harbor's mouth
opening into the sky.

—*Louis Simpson*

Ars poetica

Canvasbacked wing above my head & strained vision through the angled
struts, the ballbearing grind of the single-engined bushplane
burrowing up into the August blue currents as we rose

to catch the diminuendo of the state road receding & before us
the winding branch of the flintcold boulderstudded branch
of the Middlebury River threading like a silver necklace

between the cleavage of the mountains, the countless matchwood sticks
below (the slick trick the high mast gives to massive pine & maple
unyielding did we ever have to crashland anywhere in there)

& easy now he half sings into the headphone above
the engine's whine hypnotic even as we come up
over the headlong rushing crest to catch the road down which

we had earlier driven, the rusting vintage trailers hidden
in among the trees like so many painted turtles sunning unawares,
the gutted hulks on cinder blocks in yardways & the flinty quilt-

work patches of the rundown farms ashine now in the elongated
wheatgold rosy fingers of a too too happy sun
lazing down the southeast heavens before we tilt hard to starboard

& buzz the yellow inn slanting sideways with the doll-like figures
some of whom are waving as others go on about their business
& I wave, my heart lost & going out to them

in a gesture which at this distance must be useless & because
the trick is not to stop we break off now across the wilderness
again where no roads are, not even fire trails that I can see

& in a pocket of a moraine a pond flares up, its phoenix fire
silverlining two hawks circling as they have for ages,
& then at once the mountain we have been climbing falls from sight

until gravity & time itself & fear of that *felix culpa*
are burned away but for the telltale stain of yellow
in a single maple worlds below & then, as it must always be,

a shudder as we bank & catch again the paper wings & rhythmic
pump of engine & the complex numbers on a panel, the inward breathing
playing with the heady benzine breathing outward of forever.

—*Paul Mariani*

Letter from Italy

Morandi of Bologna

by W. S. Di Piero

When an acquaintance of mine who had been raised in the countryside came to live in Bologna several years ago, the city seemed to him a dreary labyrinth. He arrived in the abbreviated days of winter when the Apennine chill and Po Valley fog press a steel lid on the town for weeks. The streets throughout the historical center are lined with porticoes, and to my friend the citizens coursing up and down the gloomy arcades were mysterious bolts of shadow scrambling for constant shelter. William Dean Howells detested Bologna for that same reason: the *portici* make the sidewalks "a continuous cellarway; your view of the street is constantly interrupted by the heavy brick pillars that support the arches." The entire city, he says in *Italian Journeys*, is "dull, blind, and comfortless." Howells, like many visitors to Italy, was intent on the picturesque, the ample and immediately self-revealing view of things, rather than the natural history of a town, which is always a more private, withheld matter. If you are content with the short view, with the chopped and interrupted picturesque, the porticoes of Bologna can be elegantly spectral. The pillars and arches are each palazzo's structural signature. And you can track the seasons by the shifting blinds and ladders of light fanning out on the pavement like primitive time-telling devices, though the galleried view often bends out of sight in the near distance. Off the broader, fashionable main avenues, the dimensions change; the passageways become narrow

square chutes, the pavement rolls and swells, the pillars are squat, the ceilings stooped, and the shops are mineral recesses with dusty illumination.

The shops on Via Fondazza, a narrow street connecting two main thoroughfares, are considerably smaller than the average American garage. There is a cobbler whose display space accommodates one small table with one shoe on it; there is a one-chair barbershop, and a water-heater retailer with brass elbow joints spread like jewels in the window. The houses are painted in familiar Bolognese reds, oranges, and yellows, powdery textures so finely distinct that they imitate the alarming minor changes of tint in dreams. Via Fondazza is where Giorgio Morandi had his famous dusty studio for most of his working life. The bunched columns and chopped towers of his still lifes, their "low ceiling," and the fibrous granular textures of his palette may not be directly modeled on Bologna's characteristics, but anyone who lives here long enough will surely recognize and perhaps better understand Morandi's form language, seeing in it the larval shadows of this unique cityscape. The Bolognesi are justly famous for their cordiality and outgoingness, but the look of their city is recondite, rounded back on itself, reticent, self-returning.

There are many legends about Morandi, the chief one being that he was a studio hermit who, working for several decades in an historical vacuum, imitated his own forms

endlessly but brilliantly. The recent large show mounted here by the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna, "Morandi and his Time," intends to destroy these assumptions and to position Morandi in the historical matrix of his time. His international reputation is certainly secure, but the historical criteria of that reputation have not yet been convincingly articulated. The praise that greeted the retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1981 was, in too large a part, the exuberance of belated discovery rather than analytical reappraisal.¹ Such reappraisal is the declared purpose of the Bologna show. The argument set forth in the arrangement of works (219 on display, 116 by Morandi) and developed in the catalogue is that Morandi's career is neither a regional, isolated phenomenon nor an eccentric twentieth-century "case." He was instead, the show argues, implicated at every stage of his development in the redefinition of formal values in painting that was taking place in Western Europe. To chronicle and document Morandi's passage through the currents of his time the show includes work by other artists selected to illustrate and endorse the argument. The problem with this strategy is that some of those selections are live grenades that practically explode the argument they are meant to prove.

The show is arranged in sections, each an historical or stylistic designation. The early stages—"Predecessors," "Formative Years: The International and Local Context," "The Beginnings"—establish the formal matrix of what would become Morandi's most frequent subject, the still life. The two Cézanne still lifes, *Vase paillée, sucrier, et pommes* (1890-94) and *La vase bleue* (1883-87), announce the early modernist formal values by which Morandi's practice might be better understood. Morandi took Cézanne as his first master, though he did not see much of the actual work until 1914, when he went to

the Second Secession Exhibition in Rome, where some of Cézanne's watercolors were being shown. (He had already seen some canvases by Renoir and Monet in 1910 and 1911; for the rest, most of his familiarity with early modern French painting came from books.) The manner of presentation in the Cézanne paintings is, as usual, that of an object-offering. The table, or platform, tilts toward us; the forms of fruit, dish, and vase are ritual presentations, self-disclosures. The objects are not in repose; they urge themselves forward, ingeniously disposed, at once defiant and inviting. Juxtaposed to the two Cézannes is a *natura morta* by Braque dated 1917 (Morandi was then twenty-seven). Even with its edited, reshuffled figures—pipe, glass, table cover—the canvas is a field of offering, and the Cubist self-consciousness of rearranged reality offers itself as part of the presentation. Likewise in Cézanne's still lifes the canvas is a field that discloses the actual activity of the form-making imagination, not only the products of it. In neither artist is there any hint of monumentality (except, in Braque's case, to mock it) or of the contrived statuesque.

The early Morandi oils on display, from 1905 to 1913, show the influence of Monet's thick, analytical brushwork, the color pushed to dissolve the definitions of the subject—flowers, landscape, snowstorm. The youthful exuberance in these paintings argues against the confinements of the frame, but this enthusiasm will be replaced by rigor once the full influence of the predecessors has been absorbed. Along with Morandi's early works are two small still lifes by his contemporary Giacomo Vespignani which have the same violent energy pushing against the frame that Morandi's early landscapes possess. Vespignani is also the subject of a portrait by Osvaldo Licini that appears close by one of Morandi's early portraits (*Ritratto femminile*, 1912). The pinched, mechanical, heavily painted surface of the Morandi looks unintentionally primitive and embarrassed next to the Licini portrait, in which the forms are carved from paint, coaxed into a figure which seems ten-

1 "Giorgio Morandi: A Retrospective Exhibition" was organized by James T. Demetron of the Des Moines Art Center. The show was on view in Des Moines and San Francisco, as well as New York.

tative and romantically dissonant next to the overdetermined classicism of Morandi's portrait. Seen in the context of Cézanne's energetic maturity, Braque's witty experiments, and the nervous vitalism of his more conspicuous Italian contemporaries, Morandi's early explorations seem shy. There is a deflective wariness in his work that at first glance seems like mere formal reserve.

The poster for the show reproduces a *natura morta* from 1918. It is both an unlikely and purposive choice, since that was the period of Morandi's brief involvement with *la pittura metafisica* and his connection with *Valori Plastici*, the so-called "return to order" magazine. The poster image immediately establishes the cross-reference to de Chirico while also suggesting the formal schematic rigor that remained with Morandi throughout his career. The image's colors are sand, buff, and dark brown; the standing objects are a bottle, a box, and a hat-dummy, disposed in an attitude of military alertness. Morandi's famous organization of standing objects is beginning to emerge, but within the historical definitions of his time. Another painting in this mode shows a big box with foldaway vertical planes that echo the box sides, forms gravely mocking forms. Thus far, the show's argument is persuasive, but we can also read these earlier paintings as indications not of what Morandi was absorbing but of what he was choosing to exclude. The influence of *metafisica*—its hard shadows, depopulated spaces, interrupted dream narratives—passes quickly, as if Morandi was merely trying out a manner. For in less than two years Morandi begins painting the studio objects that would occupy him for the rest of his life, and the famous Morandi dust begins to settle on the view the canvas discloses. The hermeticism of subject that *metafisica* favored soon gives way to hermetic exploration of formal values. His early work, however, certainly suggests already that, for Morandi, the making of forms is a stay against some darkness, that all around the exposed platform are shadows held in check, barely, lest they consume and dissolve the articulation of objects

that momentarily hold the light. I don't mean to suggest that some kind of Manichean melodrama is being worked out in Morandi's paintings. It is not a religious contest but an imaginative one in which the mind struggles to cope with, and *measure*, the forms it produces. Were it not for this contest, Morandi's work would be imperceptibly monumental (as it does, in fact, too often become). The monumentality is in part a hedgehog reflex, self-protective and self-declarative. After the brief encounter with *metafisica* and *Valori Plastici* Morandi commences the crucial and definitive formal adjustments: the ceiling in the paintings gets lower; the field of objects is purged of suggestive whimsy; the arrangement of objects ceases to imply proliferation or abundance; the frame becomes a hermetic seal.

The great style is arrived at early in 1920. In a *natura morta* of that year four equidistant objects—lime, cylinder, tubby narrow-neck bottle, small tipped-over bowl—are spread across the platform, which is colored a recognizable Bolognese reddish-brown. The platform's rear edge, the horizon, is almost suffocatingly foreshortened. None of the objects, not even the bowl with its open white mouth, is presented as ritualized offering. The space between the objects is tenuous, something risked. Ash seems to have settled on the entire scene. The painting is both annunciatory and concealing. The subsequent years of Morandi's long career—he died in 1964—dramatized the closing and calibrated measures of those spaces, an increasing huddled protectiveness, a diminishing faith in space as a field of disclosure, but also an abundant curiosity about the tense, rigorous modulations of restraint. From now on, much of his imagination will be devoted to the infinite redefinitions in tint and texture of the scrim that often veils the scene he paints, the "second screen" of his art.

In the Twenties and Thirties Morandi began the long methodical testing of boundaries, and trying out of his vocabulary of

forms, conducted in the famous processional style. Nearly everything in the many still lifes produced in these years is upright. The background darkens. The tense, becalmed composition suggests enthusiasm forcefully held in check. The drama of color and brushstroke is sober, reserved, paid out in small sums. Even when the familiar bottles and lamps are pink, hazy blue, or sky-green, the formal discipline infuses a weightiness into those buoyant colors. And there is now that constant Morandi scrim, *la seconda tela*. A filter or mute has been locked on the light source, so that every work is a kind of double canvas: the field of objects on their platform, and the screen that chafes or powders or scorches the light before it arrives to illuminate the field.

Looking at the two dozen paintings from this period included in the show, one becomes more aware not only of the increasing density of color and variety of form in Morandi's art, but also, more importantly, of the fact that these have been *allowed* into the painting. The drama of still-life presentation thus becomes in large part the assertion of denial, or exclusiveness, encoded into formal curiosity. The paint is still thick, even a little raw, and its energy strains against a subtle diffidence that would thin out or repress that energy. In *Fiori* (1924), orange blooms rise tall out of a blue-gray vase against a violent yellow background. The figures are rather tentative, as if Morandi has not quite decided just how vital they ought to appear. That tentativeness, and the general reserve characteristic of his mature style, are exaggerated by contrast with another Licini piece, a *natura morta* from 1926, in which a plate of *verdura* is a mass of frenzied yellow-black scribbles and an orange is so tensely drawn that it seems about to explode. Set alongside Morandi's measured deliberations, Licini's vitalism seems an hysteria of forms.

The great painting of those years is a 1929 *natura morta* with cans, funnels, and coffeepots spread on a wide platform. The objects are almost devoured by their background, a creamy mud-vermillion that rhymes

closely with the objects' colors. Even the platform, tilted slightly forward, seems fused to the background. The figure outlines in this alluvial landscape (or studioscape) measure and mark the frontier that prevents form from resolving into the oblivion of its ground. It is a terrifyingly beautiful painting in which Morandi's struggles with imaginative form are played out with impassioned, almost self-destructive, energy. In the same gallery, however, are four pictures from 1935 to 1941, all with the same oil lamp and bottles, obviously the curators' attempt to demonstrate the variety of Morandi's form vocabulary even when using identical objects in practically identical arrangements. But in the presence of that other work, these four are unhappy reminders of the rather mannered stateliness which, by the mid-Forties, had become too familiar a signature of Morandi's work. Too constant a return to familiar models familiarly expressed can soak up an artist's curiosity about the very forms which presumably ought to vex him into new assertions, new variations.

This, I believe, was the profound inhibition in a good deal of Morandi's work, and it becomes more evident as the style becomes more masterful. In the 1929 "mud painting," Morandi was more obviously caught up in a problem which throughout his career would make good trouble and be a counterforce to "masterly" executions. The frontier or membrane that defines each object in that painting against its primogenitive ground is clearly under stress. The stability of forms (which is to say, reality differentiated) is a condition *won*, arrived at after trouble; it is not a predetermined value or formal assumption. And the claims exerted by the ground, the original mass out of which the forms have been worked and stilled, are yet powerful enough to suck those forms back into the molten, undifferentiated state which stifles and contests emergence of any sort. For decades Morandi painted the same figures, and he held perhaps too strictly to the studio conventions he had developed in those secluded years on Via Fondazza, but the real *matter* of his

career was the struggle with differentiation and emergence.

By the early Fifties Morandi's palette had lightened, but the ceiling is even lower, and it becomes more difficult than before to read a history of sensibility in his paintings as we can in figurative artists like Francis Bacon and Zoran Music, both of whom have very specialized form-vocabularies but whose work, to use one of Bacon's favorite phrases, comes more immediately off their nervous system. With the brighter, hazier tones of the late Forties and early Fifties also comes a deeper reticence and hiddenness, as if Morandi were becoming a prisoner of his own highly developed studio values. Such a judgment gets easily confused with the legend of Via Fondazza: the silent, solitary recluse who pursued his own way, undistracted by trends and "isms." The catalogue corrects part of this and documents Morandi's frequent contact with local colleagues, his attendance at shows of his own and others' work, and his acquaintances among Bologna's literary personalities. The larger question, and really the only one that finally matters, is that of the hermetic quality of his art.

Morandi's real solitude lay in his strait, intense dedication to perfecting a narrow range of forms in constant variations of arrangement, tone, and texture. Early in his career, after the experiments with *metafisica*, he limited and sealed off the view—whether still life or landscape—and concentrated on the elected forms. He effectively cut down to nearly marginal dimensions the fields of forms within which his curiosity could passionately engage itself. An artist like Zoran Music, whose big retrospective in Venice in the fall was more revealing and suggestive in its argument, also worked countless variations of his Dalmatian scenes. Within those, however, were various subjects and manifold forms: landscapes, horses, peasants, gypsies, pastures, ferryboats. And he had other subjects which allowed obsessive, serial treatment: the Venice paintings; the extermination camp series, "*Non siamo gli ultimi*"; the extraordinary atelier paint-

ings in which the artist is portrayed as a minuscule figure before an enormous empty canvas, staring at his model across an oceanic stone-gray waste. One sees Music's vocabulary developing, expanding, pounding at its own limits, his curiosity exercising itself in such a formalized way that the very exploration becomes a kind of subliminal subject. Morandi chose a much less inclusive (though, some would argue, more exacting) course, and over the years was able to perfect that modest, remote, always vaguely self-replicating majesty of forms. The scholarly quibbles in the catalogue—did Morandi derive his light from Monet? did he take over formal arrangements from Cézanne?—are beside the point. What makes Morandi a difficult and troubling artist is that decisiveness. In the work of the Fifties, the ordinary pleasures of an artist practicing all his powers are there in abundance. Morandi was a colorist of extraordinary nuance: the phasing of the scrim, the refined densities of tint, the subtly graduated pressures exerted by ceiling and platform—all are achieved with remarkable precision. But if one intensifier of pleasure is difficulty—that is, the uneasy and vexed delight we feel before some of Cézanne's late watercolors with their empty white patches, or Bacon's smeared figures, where the life of forms is challenged just when it is most confidently resolved—that is not one of the primary pleasures Morandi offers, though the tension is not entirely absent.

His rapturously self-enclosing career is most aggressively displayed in a group of smallish canvases constellated on one wall—still lifes and one landscape, all dating from the Fifties—which comprise an imagination's universe of forms. It is, however, a planetarium view. The paintings are so coherent that they harmonize too avaiably one with another; their conversation is subdued and well mannered. Within this voluptuously sober vision, however, is that troubling element I mentioned earlier (and visible only close up, and hardly at all in reproductions, since it is so much in the life of the paint) which suggests an earnest dis-

sonance: the figures—all those familiar cans, vases, and turreted pots—oscillate, their metal skins quivering slightly, rubbery, almost liquefied. The limits of solidity are being tested. In previous decades, the drawing in Morandi's canvases was generally more definitive, a stronger, less supple harness on the energy of forms. In the paintings of the Fifties, the containment of matter's chaos in those figures is more fragile and uncertain. Also, the figures are not planted on the platform as in the earlier work; they balance, afloat on the nearly molten stuff of the table, in a state of imminent dissolution.

This is not to say that Morandi returned to the drama of the mud painting, but rather that within the cloister of his studio the very mastery of the familiar generated an uneasiness and discontent. The real interest of the late work lies in that provocative, tensed delay in pushing familiar forms back to their undifferentiated beginnings. Morandi's art was never as self-interrogating as that of some of the artists whom I've mentioned or who are included in the show. There is one Giacometti on display, an undated still life: slate ground, slate foreground, brushstrokes like scar tissue, a vase of yellow radiants spearing from a vase already half-engulfed by the whirling movement of the tabletop. One of the curators suggested to me that Giacometti had learned lessons in still-life composition from Morandi. I should say instead that Giacometti, the greater artist, was more skillful and tenacious in expressing, in the execution of his subject matter,

the energy of the act of rendering. There is in all of Giacometti's post-Surrealist work the active presence of an intelligence passionately engaged in formal explorations. Positioned as it is among Morandi's straining, polite images of the late period, Giacometti's one picture is a rude but memorable guest who might, in a moment of inattentiveness, spit on the rug.

But out of his elected scheme, out of that system of resistance and enforced calm, came the masterpiece of Morandi's last years, a *natura morta* of 1963. The small (30 x 35 cm.) canvas shows white vases on a snowy, spectral, gray-green ground. Behind the vases looms a vermilion mass, more garish and light-infested than in the early mud painting. The image is not, as I have heard suggested, a death song. An allegorical reading can only reduce the power of the image. What makes the painting sublime, in the terms I've been trying to set down here, is that the figures, the containers of substance and restrainers of matter's chaos, are disappearing into their ground, into that now redder and bloodier alluvial muck which Morandi tested so many years before. He is turning the life of form back toward dissolution, conducting his own finest imaginings toward oblivion. No dust has settled on the image. No scrim protects it. There is only the open, enthusiastic, liquid textures of the figured paint. It is as if Morandi were reviewing and summing up the history of his form language, while turning the act of a self-review into a renewed contest with chaos.

The return of Mies van der Rohe

by William H. Jordy

The strong impact of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's architecture on his adopted country is obvious from the extent of the American centennial celebration of his birth. Parties are occurring at all the proper places.

The big exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art organized by Arthur Drexler—"Mies van der Rohe Centennial Exhibition"—harkens back to Philip Johnson's MOMA exhibition of 1947, which introduced Mies to the American public in a comprehensive manner. Together with Johnson's catalogue, that exhibition provided the first extended survey of the architect's work anywhere in the world—this when Mies was already sixty. In some way, Mies uniquely belongs to MOMA. Not only did Johnson consider him to be the greatest of all modern architects (Johnson began his architectural career as an avowed disciple), but Alfred Barr also admired his work. So much was this the case that in the mid-1930s Barr attempted (in vain) to convince his trustees to make Mies the architect for the museum. In gratitude, Mies left his formidable collection of drawings and office correspondence to MOMA, making what is officially called the Mies van der Rohe Archive the most important source for scholarship on the architect anywhere in the world. So the exhibition at MOMA is something of a family affair.

But of course Mies belongs to Chicago, too, where he was welcomed as an émigré in 1938 and where he established his office and taught. Two exhibitions are scheduled

there. The first, entitled "Mies van der Rohe: Architect as Educator," takes place at the Illinois Institute of Technology. It will cover three aspects of Mies's career: his teaching at the Bauhaus and at IIT, his buildings for IIT, and the transmission of his ideas by teachers at IIT. The second Chicago exhibition, entitled "The Unknown Mies van der Rohe and his Disciples of Modernism," will be on view at the Art Institute. What is "unknown" here are some two hundred and fifty drawings and objects from various sources outside the Archive in New York. The exhibition will also feature the works of some of the best of Mies's disciples in the Chicago area, where many of the finest Mies-inspired buildings were erected during the last years of his life, and after.

The centennial is being celebrated with the appearance of several books as well, some of them slightly anticipating the event. There has been a comprehensive annotated bibliography and chronology on Mies by David Spaeth; a sensitive and detailed study of Mies's country houses by Wolf Tegethoffs; and two biographies, one by Spaeth, which provides a fine introduction to Mies's career, the other by Franz Schulze, which will surely be the standard life of Mies for some time to come. All two thousand drawings in the MOMA Archive (which also contains twenty thousand other items) will appear in four volumes, with commentary by Drexler and Schulze. There will be three exhibition catalogues, as well as a volume

of essays on Mies by leading scholars, to be published by MOMA. In the offing, too, is an analysis by Richard Pommer and Christian Otto of the Weissenhof Exhibition of 1928 in Stuttgart, which Mies directed. All in all, the extent of the Mies celebration in America is without precedent for any architect.¹ Only the re-erection of his famed Barcelona Pavilion on its original site, which is scheduled to be completed this

spring, matches in significance the American festivities.

All this enthusiasm is the more astonishing because only yesterday, it seems, Mies was the modernist of greatest stature at the bottom of the postmodernist barrel. Robert Venturi had crystallized growing sentiments in his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* of 1966 when he inverted Mies's austere dictum "less is more" to "less is a bore." The architectural critic Charles Jencks made Mies the villain, implicitly, where not explicitly, in his series of almost annual reports—from the 1970s onward—on "where architecture is *now*." Jencks bemoaned what he termed the "univalent" meaning of a Miesian I-beam from the Seagram Building, which he compared to the inexhaustible "multivalent" imagery of Le Corbusier's Chapel at Ronchamp. From the Chapel's sculptural forms Jencks happily extracted such peekaboo images as praying hands, a nun's coif, and a boat. An imaginative eye, Jencks clearly implied, could wrench even more images from the Chapel, and the more the merrier.

Even without such critical prompting, however, by the 1970s the public at large had thoroughly tired of the metal-and-glass corporate rectangular blocks which loomed in every American downtown. To this day they continue to appear, in the rearguard of unimaginative office buildings. For these Mies has been held ultimately responsible. Yet along comes his centennial and the occasion is a triumph.

The substantial notice of his achievement does not mark a return to the Mies variants, copies, and dilutions which swept America (and then the world) in the late 1950s and 1960s. Rather, it shows that the time has come—and more quickly than one would have expected a few years ago—when the surface effects of what is termed postmodernism are themselves becoming a "bore." The postmodernist idea of architecture has begun to wear thin: the nondescript box, fronted by stage-flat allusion to high-style buildings of the past, or to folk and commercial vernacular, or to Shangri-la orna-

1 The centennial year got underway with an exhibition of drawings from the collection of the Chicago architect A. James Speyer at the Max Protech Gallery in New York in February. The exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (February 10-April 15) will travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (May 9-August 10) and to Berlin and Barcelona. Arthur Drexler's catalogue is forthcoming. IIT's "Mies van der Rohe: Architect as Educator" (June 16-July 12), under the curatorship of George Danforth, will travel to the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin and to the Royal Institute of British Architects in London. The catalogue, published by the University of Chicago Press (176 pages, \$39.95), will contain essays by Reyner Banham, George Schipporeit, Fritz Neumeyer, Richard Padovan, Sandra Honey, and Kevin Harrington. "The Unknown Mies van der Rohe and his Disciples of Modernism" at the Art Institute of Chicago (August 20 to October 5) will travel to the Deutsches Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt and probably to the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The catalogue will contain essays by David Spaeth, Christian Otto, Peter Eisenman, Francesco dal Co, Kenneth Frampton, and Stanley Tigerman (Rizzoli, 120 pages, \$20). Apparently, the only European-originated exhibition for the centennial is "Less is More," at the Aachen City Hall in Aachen, West Germany (May 17-June 29).

Recent books include: David Spaeth's *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe: An Annotated Bibliography and Chronology* (Garland, 1979) and *Mies van der Rohe* (Rizzoli, 205 pages, \$25 paper); Franz Schulze's *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography* (University of Chicago Press, 355 pages \$39.95); and Wolf Tegethoff's *Mies van der Rohe: The Villas and Country Houses* (MOMA and MIT Press, 223 pages, \$55). This summer Garland will publish *The Mies van der Rohe Archive of The Museum of Modern Art* in four volumes (\$220 each, \$800 complete).

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ment, or to some mishmash of these, and all treated in a broad, cartoonlike manner. Not that the "decorated shed," which Venturi and his collaborators extolled in *Learning from Las Vegas* of 1972, has lost its relevance; nor is all postmodernist architecture mere superficial effect. Yet there is enough of the superficial kind to create a longing for a more serious architecture. And here the gravity of Mies's mien and message begins to impose itself—this time, happily, it would seem, more for the implications of his buildings than for the superficialities of his manner.

One expects to sense the immense authority of Mies's example upon stepping into the MOMA exhibition, and one is not disappointed. The clarity and spare elegance of Arthur Drexler's exhibition design are especially congenial to Mies's work; they intensify one's awareness of an achievement which is the more commanding in that its austerity provides no special effects behind which to hide. "I don't want to be interesting," Mies is often quoted as saying. "I want

to be *good*." No curator is better able than Drexler to place and scale photographs so as to reveal the qualities inherent in buildings, or better able to distribute them rhythmically within an exhibition space so as to suggest the creative flow and punctuation of sequences within an *oeuvre*. Mies's career, rooted as it is in a series of basic themes explored with great intensity, is beautifully articulated through such exhibition design.

Yet it must be said that this exhibition has an official aura to it: it confirms cachet rather than offering new ideas. (These, presumably, will be found in Chicago.) The exhibition includes many drawings that should provide insight into Mies's design process, especially where they are gathered into sheaves at three points in the show: namely, in a group of schemes for the courted houses of the 1930s, a veritable frieze of sketches for the IIT buildings, and (one of the high spots in the exhibition) an array of preliminary variants for Mies's furniture. But no special effort is made to guide the viewer through these drawings. Luckily,

the furniture drawings—because of their easily understood nature, and because of the presence of the furniture itself (as the ultimate resolution to all the variants)—make a striking impact anyway. Above all, they show the tremendous versatility with which Mies could vary a design.

The MOMA exhibition, in fact, seems to be deliberately intended as an extension of what Johnson did almost forty years ago. Many of the photographs are the same—and, of course, for many of the earlier projects which were never built, or for buildings that no longer exist, they *must* be the same. But even recent work appears in the ideal state of what seem to be the original presentation photographs. These tend toward a middle-toned grayness and slight fuzziness which removes them from any immediate sense of visitation. One wishes for the jolt of fresh visions that might have come from a leading architectural photographer of the present generation. One also wishes for views that might have given a sense of Mies's buildings holding their own (or perhaps failing to do so) in their settings.

The wall labels do occasionally comment on the practical deficiencies of Mies's buildings. Thus, we read that the twin blocks for the 860 Lake Shore Drive apartments looked best when they were skeletons, before tenants moved in. They spoiled the homogeneity of Mies's glass front by individually adjusting the gray drapery and venetian blinds which he had decreed as an outer layer of uniformity to cloak the even more individualistic window treatments that tenants might choose to hang behind. Another label asserts that the Crown Hall at IIT is best seen in its model, where the ceiling appears as a pristine plane without the mottled texture of acoustical tile and the interruptions of inset panels for fluorescent lights. Yet another confesses that the architectural scale of the Berlin National Gallery overwhelms most of the works installed in it, while light from the all-glass walls, even though deeply recessed under the widely projecting plane of the roof, competes with the light that the curator seeks. And so on.

But in Drexler's presentation, which is as remorselessly ideal as Mies would have wished it, the deficiencies are mentioned only in passing. And, to be fair, the ideal presentation permits Mies's idea of architecture to appear without the distraction of what may seem to be peripheral concerns. If, however, "Architecture is the will of the epoch translated into space," as Mies said it was, then one would like to sample a piece of the "epoch." For surely at this late date, when major buildings by Mies in the United States have been up for thirty and forty years, his ideal order ought to be seen in context. The point of such an exercise would be not to show the flaws in Mies's work, but to assess the degree to which abstract architectural orders of the power and intensity of Mies's organize and enoble, as promised, the environments in which they exist. The mostly black-and-white photographs in the exhibition confirm that nothing here is meant to disturb the gray-flannel decorousness.

Even an exhibition as dedicated to the pursuit of the ideal as this one should have given more attention to the material effects of Mies's design, on which his idealization depends. Fewer photographs might have permitted more large-scale (even full-scale) models of details. Where such details do occur in the exhibition the effect is electrifying. The gleaming reproductions of columns from the Barcelona Pavilion and the Tugendhat House possess the intensity of abstract sculpture. A large wooden model of a detail from the National Gallery in Berlin—Mies used it to study the relationship of the weighty roof slab to its pinned juncture—overwhelms the photographs around it. The physical presence of more such models might have jolted the viewer out of the haze of idealization the photographs help to create. How much more vivid the exhibition could have been with large-scale, comparative models of Mies's American framed-metal-and-glass buildings, for example, or with a sequence of models illustrating various combinations of framing and infill for the buildings of IIT.

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The exhibition begins with a threshold introduction to Mies's neo-classicism prior to World War I. But soon after one confronts his passion for materials in the famous pair of drawings for glass-tower buildings (1921 and 1922). These are among the most monumental architectural drawings of the modern movement, in both size and concept. They introduce a series of five revolutionary projects done by Mies between 1920 and 1924, for four of which the original perspective drawings are preserved. Although a nostalgia for neo-classicism lingers in some of Mies's drawings of the mid-1920s, these revolutionary projects really initiated his full commitment to the idea of modern architecture.

The glass towers were designed to fit an irregular, wedge-shaped site—one in prismatic angles, the other in free-form curves. In the drawings, which are over six feet high, they appear as cliffs of glass, and show the evanescent shifts of reflections induced by the angles and curves, respectively, of the two designs. Further along in the exhibition,

projects for a spreading country house and a framed office building in reinforced concrete are captured in equally large drawings, these over ten feet long. The surfaces of these buildings possess a sandiness of texture on which, one feels, a match could be struck; the matte granularity of the wall surfaces is magnified by contrast with the fragile glint transparency of the glass openings. Mies presents all four projects with head-on directness: he shows no more than the buildings in generalized settings and emphasizes the materials from which they directly emerge.

The same direct involvement with materials is recorded in photographs of the industrial exhibitions which Mies did with Lilly Reich in the late Twenties. A glass exhibition features a phalanx of tall, broad, glass cylinders. A silk exhibition uses only chrome-plated tubing, on which the material is draped to create an undulating, free-standing wall of shimmering fabric, reminiscent of the curved-glass building, which he would never realize. A materials exhibi-

tion features a foreground of logs of rare woods as they come rough-hewn from the jungle; polished planks hang on the wall behind. In works like these, where the physical presence speaks for itself, Mies appears as a spiritual forbear to the materialist Minimalists of the 1960s.

Had Drexler made more of the physical aspects of Mies's buildings, his show could have found a happy conjunction with the exhibition of Richard Serra's sculpture upstairs at MOMA. Both architect and sculptor stare into the very guts of materials and force a comparable intensity of confrontation on viewers of their works through the spare assertion of physical proportion and structural possibilities. The architect idealizes what the sculptor approaches realistically. In a world of unlimited funds, imagine the impact of Serra's metal plates in a gallery upstairs, with a reconstruction of Mies's monument to Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg below—the burnt clinker brick stacked up to symbolize the wall before which these German Communists met their political martyrdom, the long, narrow, Cubist-like play of its rectangular blocks calling up coffins.

The elemental nature of Mies's creativity, so purely focused on architecture and what it could mean for the modern epoch, has been alternately a source of inspiration and exasperation. The imperious austerity, resolve, and refinement which he expended on ARCHITECTURE—one tends mentally to capitalize the word in his connection—bespeak something of the manner of the *grand seigneur*, as well as something of a Michelangelesque *terribilità*. Thanks to Franz Schulze's new biography, and to the current fashion for a franker approach to architects' private lives, we know that Mies abandoned his wife and children, and that he escaped all his life from a full commitment to women—in order to preserve his personal freedom for the pure realm of architecture. He could be charming, jovial with close friends despite his natural reserve, and even caring—but only insofar as these activities did not impinge on the core of his concern.

Mies's self-absorption also accounted for his passivity with respect to politics. As Schulze remarks, between 1928 and 1933 Mies built a monument for the Communists, briefly headed a socialist-oriented school (the Bauhaus), and competed as a finalist for the design of the Nazis' Reichsbank. In most men such actions would indicate rank opportunism; but Mies was far from opportunistic when it came to what mattered to him. Rather, he was indifferent to politics. Of course, the consequences of all action, personal and professional, cannot be ignored; but, if the integrity of a life lies in one field of endeavor, then that is where the ultimate reckoning must be made.² Mies's private life only shows how intense and single-minded, and somewhat frightening, his commitment to architecture was. Because it was so intensely focused, it was even fiercer than the heedlessness of Wright and Le Corbusier to extra-professional concerns.

If Mies now seems to be re-emerging from temporary eclipse as a major inspiration in architecture, it is not because his essentialist approach to architecture is single-minded or narrowly focused, but because it is comprehensive. He repeatedly calls on the "truth" of architecture, but the location of this truth depends on its fix in relation to three coordinates. If what Mies finds possesses massive authority, it is because his three tests for truth are integrated and mutually reinforcing.

First, of course, there is truth to technology. Mies's convictions about technology may have been innate, considering his patrimony in the building trades. Even

2 It has been alleged that, along with other German intellectuals and artists, Mies signed a document issued by Paul Schultze-Naumburg in behalf of the *völkische Kulturpolitik*. But Franz Schulze has been unable to find proof of Mies's participation. Mies would have had to sign papers guaranteeing his Aryan purity in order to enter the Reichsbank competition. On the other hand, he closed the Bauhaus rather than permit the Nazis to interfere with its program.

though the family specialty was in decorative marble work for monuments and architecture—hardly the cutting edge of technology—at the very least it instilled in Mies his impeccable sense of craft and workmanship. When he came to work as an assistant to Peter Behrens in 1908, he became immersed in technology. Behrens was the first large-scale corporate designer of the twentieth century. From 1908 to 1914, he directed the design of factories, workers' housing projects, products, advertising, and corporate image for Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft in Berlin (the equivalent to America's General Electric). Behrens's larger aim was to provide Germany with a national image of industrial order and might. Through the harmonious design of consumer products, the ideal of technological enlightenment would spread to the German people; and by export these spare, well-proportioned, conveniently organized products would carry the image of German technological excellence throughout the world. Mies's experience at AEG confirmed his conviction that architecture was a heroic endeavor, capable of exemplifying through the truth of technology the "will of the epoch."

Truth to architecture, Mies's second coordinate, came to Mies, and a number of other German architects of the same time, most particularly from the early nineteenth-century neo-classicism of Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Schinkel's longing for the classical past, like neo-classicism generally in the early nineteenth century, was essentially romantic. (Indeed, in his later work he made increasing forays into medieval style, which did not of course interest Mies.) Schinkel brought Renaissance forms and order to Greek "primitivism" and "purification," relieving the severity with ornamental profiling and embellishment (which he chose with a collector's instinct for the precious and sumptuous). All of this he organized with allusions to picturesque qualities in the massing, silhouettes, and light effects that characterize the architecture of this period.

Schinkel's country retreats around Potsdam especially inspired Mies. In Mies's work, clusters of linked, templelike blocks and towers, as in Poussin's arcadian paintings, are fitted out with arcades, loggias, arbors, pools, and steps. The multiple steps accommodate the many changes of level by which Schinkel's spread of symmetrical building blocks and courted gardens—arranged in an asymmetrical composition—interact with the parklike informality of the surrounding landscape.

Although Mies was attracted to the work of Schinkel before coming to AEG, his enthusiasm for Schinkel's work was enormously reinforced by Behrens's devotion to Schinkel's neo-classicism. Behrens occasionally took his assistants to visit Schinkel's work in Berlin and Potsdam. For Behrens, the technological and the neo-classical intersected. The severity and harmony of Hellenic classicism—as filtered through early neo-classicism—defined the goals to which modern technological design should aspire. Behrens despised the purely functional as "banal." Although technology must provide the basis for form in a technological age, a narrow, functionalist approach to technology could not produce "the moment of beauty." For this, the simple forms appropriate to technology must be ennobled by reference to the geometry, proportion, and rhythms of Hellenic classicism. To Behrens—and his words could be Mies's—"the realm of art begins at the point where an object that has been simplified into a sovereign form becomes the universal symbol for all similar objects." Analogously, for Mies the tradition that *had* been classical architecture should inform the technology now decreeing what architecture *must* be. Eventually, however, Mies was disaffected with what he saw as Behrens's tendency to use Hellenic forms too literally, especially in architecture, where they often appeared as stripped-down versions of what they had been. Mies considered such design to be extrinsic to what modern architectural form should be.

"Sovereign form," "will of the epoch,"

such phrases indicate the profound influence on both Behrens and Mies of various theories of cultural determinism pervasive in nineteenth- and twentieth-century German culture. Among them there was the material determinism of the architectural theorist Gottfried Semper, although Behrens explicitly and Mies implicitly deplored Semper's positivism. There was the *Kunstwollen* of the art historian Alois Riegl, who posited an "artistic will" moving in the cultural substratum to pre-ordain certain formal predilections at particular times, which obviously appealed to both architects. In the early 1920s, when Mies's reading seemed to have been most intense, he also came upon Oswald Spengler's deterministic view of historical cycles, with its admonition that only by acknowledging and working within the situation of the inevitable modern decline of Western culture could creative artists prevail. Mies's fatality of outlook, rooted in historical process, is ponderously at odds with Le Corbusier's sprightly and expansive recommendation that "eyes that do not see" need only open to ocean liners, automobiles, and airplanes in order to grasp parallels to the forms on the Acropolis, which are all around us in these emanations of *l'esprit nouveau*.

To Mies's coordinates of technology and architecture can be added a third: truth to essence. Mies came to this third truth in the early 1920s, after leaving Behrens. It was then that he discovered his lifelong affinity to Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Aquinian judgment of things by their "essentiality," wherein the knowledge of the "form proper to [the] nature" of particular things can be known through sympathetic "intelligence." Mies aphorized St. Thomas, using the language of the modern philosopher Max Scheler: "Truth is the significance of facts." As Franz Schulze points out, this is not quite what St. Thomas said; it is rather a creative misreading by a nonphilosopher with certain practical as well as spiritual ends in mind.³

These ways of locating "truth"—from technology, Hellenic architecture, and Aquinian

philosophy—provided the reinforcing modes of inquiry by which Mies attempted to penetrate to the essence of architectural form in a pragmatic, aesthetic, and spiritual sense. But then, his understanding of architecture was also essential in character. He focused on the prototypes in which architecture most revealed itself: namely, primal types, primal components, and primal material. For Mies the probing for essentials consisted in making the essential even more vividly itself. It is this mesh of essentiality in his work which makes his influence so prodigious and, it might be added, almost inescapable, whether one is consciously influenced by him or not.

The architectural types Mies turned to were not functional or institutional, nor were they stylistic. They were fundamental. Above all, he came to concentrate on two orthogonal building types—the skeletal framed building and the pavilion. It is no exaggeration to assert that he defined these types more purely and vividly than they had ever been defined before in Western culture. The pavilion especially he made his own. In other cultures (in Asian cultures, for example) the pavilion is a major architectural type. In Western culture it always had a minor status. It calls up what is porchlike and in general agreeably playful. In Western culture, temples perhaps mark the most monumental approach to the pavilion; but, in their developed form, they are essentially closed by columns and the walls of the cells inside. Alternatively, "pavilion" is sometimes used to designate a many-windowed, decisively roofed, porchlike wing to a building,

3 Although Drexler justifiably shies away from the excessively didactic in his exhibition, it would seem that by now what is known about Mies's cultural and intellectual milieu would have mandated at least schematic presentation, especially when one imagines how much of it could have been *shown*. As cosmopolitan as Mies was, whatever he learned abroad he strained through his native culture. That German background, which is largely unfamiliar to the American public, explains much about Mies's architecture—including his staying on so long with the Nazis and leaving Germany so reluctantly.

City Streets

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as notably in many of Frank Lloyd Wright's early prairie houses, which in fact made a great impression on Mies from their pre-World War I publication in Germany. (Where "pavilion" is used for *any* wing, however—as in the by now old-fashioned designation for hospital wings—the architectural meaning of the term virtually disappears.)

Mies seems to have been especially attracted to the pavilion because it is inherently "almost nothing." It is a roof on widely spaced supports which, if partitioned at all, is done so lightly with screens. The classic example is the Japanese house, where screens (as paper panels) can be wholly removed to make a porch—a roofed platform from which to contemplate the walled garden. Mies not only devoted much of his architectural career to this minimal type, but he gave it great variety of expression—and great monumentality, too.

There is another reason for us to focus on Mies's pavilions. The multi-storied framed building in his American work represents

the most objective (or most technological) aspect of his work, the pavilion the most subjective (i.e., the most aesthetic and spiritual). Even though the expressive range of his framed buildings extends from the Paestum austerity of 860 Lake Shore Drive to the Erechtheum luxuriousness of the Seagram Building, his framed-building design generally drifted toward developers. The excellence of what resulted proved that Mies could stand up to the "will of the epoch" in its most pragmatic sense. His pavilions do include some spectacular technological demonstrations, notably his project for the Chicago Convention Hall—a vast space roofed in a deep plane of tightly latticed trusses and completely supported at the perimeter on V-shaped trussing that rests on low cylindrical columns of reinforced concrete. But generally these pavilions tended toward the subjective side of his design. It was the Aquinian sense of essence, after all, that led Mies to insist (unreasonably) that the space of the Convention Hall be absolutely clear of interior supports and that

such a vast space be covered by a flat plane requiring deep and complex truss work. (Some kind of shell construction would probably have been the “sensible” choice for the enclosure of such a gigantic, uncolumned space.)

The most lyrical of Mies’s works are to be found in his residential pavilions. In them what is rational most evidently becomes intuitive. Had it been built, the Hubbe House might have been a masterpiece. An arcadian escape from the remorseless technological aspects of the “will of the epoch,” it was one of a series of court houses which Mies did in the 1930s. In these courted pavilions, the perimeter of the site is wholly, or (as here), very nearly, closed off from the outside world by its enframement within a continuous wall. Roof planes on slender supports combine with floor planes, wall planes, and transparent plate-glass planes, sliding over, beneath, and beyond one another. The remaining, unroofed spaces within the enframing perimeter wall become garden courts, where lawns, pools, and sky are transformed into planes as well. In the Hubbe House, a void occurs on one elevation of the enframing wall, providing a narrow vista beyond the property. In this slot of space Mies’s pencil economically captures the glint of the river, with a distant sailboat tilted into the breeze. In this magic of transparent, solid, verdant, and spatial planes, a darker scribble makes an armchair materialize in the space, and then a fireplace and a piece of sculpture. Mies is a master of the scribble. What is atmosphere suddenly becomes an object in space, in a manner which suggests objects making an appearance from fog, or the materialization of objects in a Giacometti drawing.

Mies’s courted houses have become the universal property of modernism, like everything else he did; hence, it is difficult now to capture their originality. There was no real precedent for them, despite the substantial cues Mies took from Wright and de Stijl. What the Hubbe House really does is to invoke, in a new way, Schinkel’s country villas in Potsdam. It provides a wonderful play

between classical equilibrium and asymmetrical layout, between a continuous sense of architectural movement (as of a light breeze moving through the house) and restful balance, between building and nature. This is pure Schinkel. Previous to Schinkel there was only the Roman villa, with its garden courts and painted landscape allusions on the walls. One feels that an idyll like the Hubbe House was fated to remain unbuilt—destined to be an *Embarcation for Cythera* as Germany prepared for war.

Mies continually explores fresh possibilities in his pavilions. They begin with the brick project for a country house of 1924, the most Wrightian of the pavilions, with its long walls stretching out in a cross-shape from a relatively dense core. Simultaneously, it is the pavilion most indebted to de Stijl, with its excessive asymmetry and the continuation of the walls right off the page into theoretical infinity. Mies pulls in this expansiveness in the Barcelona Pavilion of 1929. The flat plane of infinity becomes a temple platform; walls that are straight or folded planes stand close to the edge of the platform, containing the space as a kind of open-ended cella. Most important, whereas wall planes in the 1924 project completely compose the brick country house (the roof slabs being laid directly on the walls), in the Barcelona Pavilion the wall planes are placed as baffles in open space, and these are supplemented by the rational regularity of eight slender, cross-shaped, chrome-plated columns, which support the principal roof slab. Supporting columns are thereby vividly expressed against the supported roof, lines against planes, a fixed order against an intuitive order. The combination of columns with roof gives conscious expression to the prototypical pavilion and temple which the wall planes complete—either as simple planes which baffle the open space, typical of the pavilion, or as folded planes which tend toward the enclosure of a cell, typical of the temple. Thus, Mies gives these traditional precedents a renewed visibility and embodiment.

In contrast to the flat site of the earlier,

1924 project—homage to Wright's prairie? homage to de Stijl's Netherlands?—the Barcelona Pavilion compels one to rise to the temple platform, just as one changes levels in moving about a Schinkel villa. And the forced turns in the Barcelona Pavilion, the changes in the character of the spaces, and the pools en route—these are reminiscent of Schinkel, too. After Barcelona came Mies's projects for the courted pavilions of the 1930s, which culminated in the Hubbe House. Here too the site is flat, but now framed and held in. The emphasis on architecture in the Barcelona Pavilion is, in the courted pavilion houses, more intimately equilibrated with nature—Schinkel's legacy again.

It was a pavilion that brought Mies to America in the late 1930s: the unrealized project that was to have been built on piers over a mountain stream near Jackson, Wyoming, for the advertising executive Stanley Resor. Here—and again with the famous Farnsworth House some years later—it is American space which conditions the design. Mies sets aside the sequestered quality of the immediate European precedents, so that the pavilion takes in a distant view. In the Resor project of 1938 the pavilion is a box as a bridge, with wooden walls closing either end. At the center, floor-to-ceiling glass opens to the cascading stream in one direction, and out to a distant mountain peak in the other. In the Farnsworth pavilion, over which Mies dawdled from 1946 to 1951, the Resor-box design becomes wholly transparent, and its rusticity (wooden walls and fieldstone fireplace) becomes elegant. For the Farnsworth House, a slab for the floor is lifted to float as a platform above the flood plain of the riverbank on which it is sited, about fifty miles southwest of Chicago. Four I-beams are set well in from the corners and welded to the edges, so that the two planar and eight linear elements come together to *make* the house, as if by magnetism. As Wolf Tegethoff observes in his new book on Mies's country houses, the subjective adjustment of elements in the

Barcelona Pavilion gives way to the greater objectivity of the Farnsworth House, as Mies turns from a pavilion made essentially of interior baffles to one made at the perimeter by the frame.

The importance of steel-framed construction in the United States, and perhaps the pragmatic feel of the place, especially in Chicago (the most pragmatic of cities), encouraged Mies to investigate the architectural possibilities of the metal frame upon his arrival there. But no sooner did he establish a steel-framed factory aesthetic for the Illinois Institute of Technology than he idealized it for the Farnsworth House. Here he sandblasts the imperfections of the steel surfaces away and etherealizes the result with a coat of white paint, to accord with the floating sensation created by the planes hovering within their park environment. This floating sensation is experienced especially in the approach to the Farnsworth House, up four broad steps to a terraced platform then up five more to the platform of the house—and all this on concealed supports so that the planes appear to be levitated in space. The country house as a box on an elevated platform reached by broad stairs—this is as Palladian as Mies would get in his residential pavilions. But Schinkel is evident as well: in the symmetries snatched from asymmetry, the sequence of levels, the sharp turns of path as one moves into the house, the arcadian mix of building and landscape. Even as Mies worked on the Farnsworth House, he pushed the concept of the house as a glass box to its ultimate reduction: a square, steel-edged roof plane is supported by four steel I-beams, one at the center of each elevation. Effectively, each elevation has been reduced to a line. "Housing units," Mies called them—but housing units for an Aquinian perfectionist who had left his family behind.

As Mies's residential pavilions peter out, his monumental pavilions come on strong. Crown Hall (1950-1956), built for the architectural school at IIT, is the Farnsworth House writ large, with exposed trusses supporting a hung roof slab between bulkier

I-beam supports. The asymmetry of the earlier project has become symmetrical, and the sandblasted ethereality is now black and industrial. Crown Hall, in turn, expands to the pavilion for the Mannheim theaters (1952-53). As a diagram at MOMA shows, this pavilion was to have been nearly as long as the Chicago Convention Hall, if narrower. Inside a glass box, two theaters are placed back to back, with a fly loft rising between them. The smaller theater is enclosed as a box on the floor; the larger rises out of the basement as a free-standing grandstand. The glass box itself serves as the lobby for these buildings within a building—one tightly contained, the other expansively looming. This project, which was never built, promised to be one of Mies's greatest. It is good to know that the original model for it will be coming to the Art Institute of Chicago, where it can be viewed for the first time since the building committee and its immediate public scrutinized it in 1952-53.

The elegant Farnsworth prototype finally explodes into the massive monumentality of the Convention Hall project (1953-54)—*terribilità* in earnest. But from the Hall's deep plane—the result of the depth of its latticed trussing—a fresh theme emerges for Mies's two last monumental pavilions. In these the roof plane appears not as a plane suspended under exposed structure but as a weighty entablature. The entablature is extended well beyond the perimeter of the glass-enclosed cella, and the columns are now cylindrical, tapered and cross-shaped in profile, only two of them to each of the very long elevations, which are set well in from the corners. The technological aura of Mies's other monumental pavilions melds into the temple aura of these.

The first of them, which was supposed to have been built in Havana for the Bacardi Company (1957-58), is lyrical in quality. It was a pity that Castro's coming terminated

the commission; such an elegant, deeply shaded pavilion—in concrete instead of steel—on a tropical island would have seemed especially appropriate as an expression of the sybaritic luxuriousness which was one of the expressive extremes to which Mies's pavilions aspired.

The National Gallery (1962-67) in Berlin is another matter. Severe, black, substantially enlarged beyond the Bacardi scheme, it provides an impressive, taut, somewhat daunting finale to Mies's lifelong investigation of the pavilion form. With the National Gallery, Mies came home again to Berlin. Nearby stands the Altes Museum, one of Schinkel's masterpieces.

If the "official centennial show" at the Museum of Modern Art offers no substantial fresh insights into Mies's achievement—and seems, indeed, to have been intimidated by Mies's reputation—it does compact Mies's achievement with such elegant clarity that we can see without distraction how varied his explorations of a single, elemental theme could be. Except perhaps in his office buildings for developers, there is little duplication in Mies's work.

In a sense, the centennial comes a little too early. Another few years would have permitted the digestion of the first group of serious studies of Mies, studies based on the copious archival material just now becoming available. Another few years would also have provided more distance from the recent moment of maximum hostility to his work. But the centennial has forced a revaluation, and this has already made evident how this great architect, by forcing his creative action to occur within the confines of so many and such austere determinants, managed to make his work inescapably important to modern architecture. Mies almost convinces us that "the will of the epoch" brought it about.

Art

Storytellers

by Jed Perl

Storytelling, one of art's oldest gifts, is always hurrying to catch up with migrations of consciousness, large and small. The narrative tradition shakes, stumbles, and then pulls itself together and prepares to assimilate another round of ruptures and revolutions, more internal decay. The anti-novel, the anti-narrative (which offer new story lines for new times) rub shoulders with many older forms. Character and scenery, conflict and resolution: the reliable antique furnishings of narrative art can, in one way or another, usually be renewed.

Painting, which had from Giotto to Delacroix a great storytelling tradition, spent much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries losing the sense of how to tell a tale. This collapsing narrative tradition mirrored a new phase of European experience; the anti-stories of Klee and Kandinsky, of Giacometti and Balthus, replaced older, seemingly more naturalistic forms. In American art, after World War II, storytelling fell almost completely by the way; it became a dissident, marginal artistic activity. No one has ever adequately explained this American rejection of narrative; nor has anything prepared us for the great shock of the past few years, which is that narrative in paint has made a violent, a very public, return. This turn takes some of us all the more by surprise because it reflects shifts we've seen going on in ourselves but haven't known we shared with so many others. Just what does it mean that formalism, the behemoth of the

postwar American art world, has been toppled overnight? All of a sudden *influential* people—dealers, curators, critics—are expecting painting, again, to narrate. The public is told to look in the art galleries for plot, for character—for a story of today.

In the Renaissance, narrative painting was said to compete with poetry. Now the competition, if there is one, must be between narrative painting and the movies, a pictorial art that speaks and travels through time and shows the world and human actions with an ease never given to products of the easel. The big new figure paintings that are shown in SoHo and receive so much attention have a self-confident aura that's meant to compete with movie—and maybe rock-music—culture. There are cinemascope-size ambitions behind Eric Fischl's incidents from suburban American life, Sandro Chia's fantasies of balloonlike flying figures, and David Salle's and Julian Schnabel's overlapping, disjunctive montages. The size of the paintings; the direct appeal they make to the public at large; the I-can-do-anything pose of the artists: all this recalls movie—often Hollywood movie—style. If the paintings of Fischl, Chia, Salle, and Schnabel were ever to succeed as works of art (which they never do) they'd probably project something like star presence, the shimmery, gliding excitement of an artistry that can mesmerize the world. But in comparison to the best current movies, these paintings don't have an immediate, this-is-your-life (or this-is-your-fantasy)

impact. The new narrative paintings seem to be straining for relevance. They're contrived, highbrow jobs.

This past March, while a retrospective of the paintings of Eric Fischl was on view at the Whitney Museum¹ and several of Fischl's most recent paintings were hanging at the Mary Boone Gallery, a new movie from Britain, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, opened in New York. Both the Fischls and the movie (directed by Stephen Frears) are about how people live now, and part of the attraction, in both cases, lies in a new, casual style of sexual revelation. *My Beautiful Laundrette* carries you into the noise and detritus of the London slums. You see Pakistani immigrants on the way up and English teenage punks on the way down. There's the enchantment of easily photographed, interesting figures, male and female, and then the surprise of a homosexual love affair growing up in the middle of it all and being, somehow, just one element among many. The camera drops in and out, picking up odd, marvelous cityscapes, and on the soundtrack there's beautiful dialogue, some spoken so quietly and quickly you barely catch it. The medium appears at ease with the world; movies are the perfect form to evoke quick, multiplying interactions. People respond to *My Beautiful Laundrette* with an exhilaration that is, in an unstuffy sense, moral: something of the cracked, dissonant splicing-together of elements in this movie clarifies the sense we have of today.

Walking through the Fischl show at the Whitney—looking at the paintings, and at people's reactions—one feels unease, a sense of the strangeness of the present; the climate is cool, dispassionate, uninvolved. The disjunctive narrative patterns in Fischl's paintings don't resonate the way the disjunc-

tures in *My Beautiful Laundrette* do. When the critics write about Fischl's paintings they make reference to life—but it's to life as a procession of labeled phenomena, not as a sensuous whole. Donald Kuspit, in an essay for the Whitney catalogue: "There's nothing out of the ordinary, unimagined, in seeing a solitary boy masturbate, as in *Sleepwalker*, 1979: what else is one to do with one's solitude in America? Why else does one want to be alone in the modern world?" Robert Storr, in *Art in America*: "It is a mistake to underestimate the complexity of the alienation that the pursuit of pleasure is meant to mask." The criticism sounds like pop social psychology for the simple reason that there's nothing firsthand you can say about the Fischls. You walk into the Whitney and see many nude bodies—young men and women, and older ones as well; but there isn't among them a single face or form that catches you the way some of the young Pakistanis and Whites do in *My Beautiful Laundrette*. An attraction to figures is something we have a right to expect in narrative painting, especially if the subject is sex. But Fischl can't make a face, a body, look beautiful. He's an inept painter, the victim of a medium in which you must labor to create allure. (Movies, by comparison, achieve bodily beauty with almost sinful ease.) Fischl's father and son lying naked together in bed, his pairs of women undressing together are awkwardly painted. It's impossible to believe in them as libidinous creatures, hankering to get into the clutch. There's this stiffness about the Fischls: his America is ugly, unpoetic, but not, probably, because there's no beauty or poetry in the suburban swimmingpools, the rooms where people undress and climb into king-size beds. Fischl, with his pale, washed-out colors, his wobbly drawing, can't make these things beautiful or provocative. And he doesn't have Edward Hopper's trick of bringing out the hidden poetry of the everyday. Fischl's tales of illicit desire carry no conviction.

The paintings Eric Fischl is showing at the Whitney (they were done between 1979 and

1 "Eric Fischl," on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art from February 18 through May 11, was organized by Bruce W. Ferguson of the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, Canada. The catalogue (56 pages, \$10) contains a foreword by Linda Milrod and essays by Jean-Christophe Ammann, Donald B. Kuspit, and Bruce Ferguson.

1985) take for their subject a young man's recollections of youth in the American middle class. Eric Fischl revises the old story of the American boy's coming-of-age in much the way David Leavitt did in his recent book of short stories, *Family Dancing*. The adolescents are still drifting through the land of grown-ups, except now sex, that old mysterious torment, has become one of the banalities, as available as the food on the supermarket shelves. Sex is out in the open, and life is still inchoate, dull. Fischl, who likes to stage his stories in bedrooms, in backyards, or on beaches, arrays his kids and dogs and grown-ups so you get the impression anything might occur. Lesbianism, incest, bestiality are all kept within the realm of possibility, but most of these never do really come to pass. As in the minds of so many doomsayers, in Fischl's head fantasy, sex, and boredom are comfortably intertwined.

If I'd never heard of Eric Fischl and happened on a couple of his paintings, I suppose they'd strike me as an interesting, promising mess. I'd respond to the bigness of the ambitions and make a mental note to keep up with his work; I'd hope he'd be able to bring his sense of drawing and color more in line with the scale of his ideas. But after the onslaught of tacky painting at the Whitney and Mary Boone I doubt whether anyone could believe Eric Fischl is a hard-working but unfulfilled artist who's just trying to break through. If you accept Fischl, you have to accept as a *fait accompli* what Kuspit calls his "photosleazy Hollywood-esque air." Fischl's painting is always stringy, his color is always pasty, and he knocks his paintings together out of formulaic modeling and a few diagonals that shoot off into space. His figures are, as he explained in an article in a recent issue of *Aperture*, taken from photographs—and they look it. Fischl doesn't understand how color builds an atmosphere; his paintings are enormous, semi-pornographic, tinted photographs. When he wants profundity—as in *A Funeral*—all he can think to do is eliminate the tints and do it up in black and white. (Kuspit compares this horrible, arid painting to Courbet's *The*

Burial at Ornans.) In the recent works at Mary Boone the color becomes darker, the paint surface becomes oilier, and we're in the sleazy back alleys of the American Ashcan school.

Like so many American artists, Eric Fischl can't resist the urge to make a statement out of paint. And after decades full of artists who insisted on the supremacy of reductive, content-famished kinds of art, content seems to be taking its revenge through Eric Fischl, who believes subject matter is king. Fischl is a discursive, windy, image-hungry artist. He's a purveyor of hortatory tracts, a salesman of patent-medicine solutions. His paintings are like spectacular fraudulent acts executed beneath the big top of the circus, and he has, in Donald Kuspit, a sort of barker, who invites the crowds to the show. Kuspit speaks about Fischl as if he were the conscience of America: "Neither modern high culture nor modern middle-class life-style offers support in one's narcissistic suffering." And "Fischl's adolescent is an allegorical personification of the tragically narcissistic infant in all of us." Kuspit seems to say, "Look at Eric Fischl's paintings, take heart, and be saved." Fischl—male, handsome, and thirty-seven—is like one of those circus-show wonders: see how fast he paints. College kids are sent from classes with titles like "Imaginative Drawing" to see his pseudo-dramas, and if they're questioned about the quality of Fischl's color, drawing, and meaning, some of them reply, only half joking, "But it's made him rich." Circus folk really do sometimes hit the jackpot and retire, like Ringling and Rauschenberg, to the Florida sun.

The imperious, public stance which is favored by Fischl and the SoHo crowd doesn't work today as a way to create an art of deep feeling. Public culture, given its immense heterogeneous contemporary audience, can only operate in relatively broad terms. These terms necessitate a rejection of the obsessive, private meditation on high-art traditions that are central to painting culture. Painting isn't impossible now, nor is narrative painting irretrievable; but a certain kind

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of direct access to culture at large is probably not within painting's reach. The scale of much of contemporary life fits the movie screen, not the easel. The fractured, image-soaked urban and suburban landscape is a fine subject, but no painter has yet made it a visual subject to the degree that Frears does in *My Beautiful Laundrette* or Godard did in his films of the late Sixties.

If one isn't going to create painted narratives under the big tent, beneath the hot lights of publicity, how is the story to be told, how is the audience to be reached or—if it isn't yet there—created? High culture, in order to remain high, may have to admit more than it likes its marginality, its peculiarity in relation to the present. The outsider, the unsung prophet, the one-man circus working the backroads: these are figures in whom we see defeat, and yet they may hold the key to where painting, a great art currently marginal to the culture, can best take its stand. Something of this ingrained eccentricity, this self-involved rebelliousness, adheres to Gabriel Laderman's new, six-part painting, *The House of Death and Life*, which was the centerpiece of his show at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery in March.

Laderman's show was overfull—and this itself is part of the story of the present. The packing of the Schoelkopf Gallery with many interesting and (by present taste) excessively disparate works bespoke the desperation of an underknown middle-aged artist yearning to get a message across. Among the beauties of Laderman's show were a small, dark tabletop still life, several crowded, pewter-colored studio interiors, and a skyscape full of birds whose opening and closing wings recalled the profusion of tiny elements in some of Kandinsky's Parisian-period abstractions. There were also a number of studio nudes, efforts of great sincerity, but deeply flawed, perhaps by the artist's reluctance to let the figure exist as a unified whole, perhaps by the lack of a natural disposition for the painting of the nude. Laderman's show would have been more consistent with cur-

rent taste if it had contained only the roughly eight-by-eleven-foot *The House of Life and Death* and the other large narrative cycle, *A Crime and its Consequences* (which I discussed in these pages last April, when it was called *Murder and its Consequences*).

In the art world of today, where galleries play a major role in creating the setting for the reception of new art, context is sometimes destiny. The Mary Boone Gallery may be too implicated in the "glitzkrieg" (to use Sidney Tillim's word) of the present to allow an honest story to be told; but the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery, which has made its reputation on a sort of flight from current trends, is also not an ideal spot for the beginnings of a modern narrative art. Schoelkopf represents a reverence for the past that looks more and more academic. Too many of the artists in this gallery compose pale, cautious watercolors, niggling still lifes, glacial nudes. Their work seems to reflect the hope that some small idea of "painting craft" can be a cloak in which to wrap oneself against all contemporary ills. Laderman himself, in certain earlier incarnations—in his New England cityscapes of two decades ago—wasn't above a tendency to see the past as a salve, as a fantasy into which to escape. But after a hiatus of seven years (during which he's not had a one-man show) he returns with a different view of the past. In the dark, burnished copper-orange world of *House of Death and Life*, the very idea of a tradition of narrative becomes a kind of furious imaginative construct, a distorting mirror held up to the mess of the present. This is a psychodrama in a dollhouse, where miniaturized people brood, fight, and die amidst eye-popping yellow highlights and shadows of impenetrable blackish navy-blue.

Fourteen years ago, when the critic Lawrence Campbell wrote an article about Gabriel Laderman for *Artnews*, he observed that "For some time, [Laderman] has been collecting Victorian dollhouses complete with period furniture to scale. He plans on posing his sitters as before, and to manipulate them to produce emotional situations.

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Then he will move back and forth between them and the interiors of the dollhouses (which are only Victorian because the best examples were made then). This is a way of painting he supposes must have been common in the Netherlands in the 17th century.” From Campbell’s description, it sounds as if Laderman had intended to use the dollhouses as working tools; but what has finally come to pass in *The House of Death and Life* is a painting that *is* a gigantic dollhouse. Six canvases are framed together in two rows to form a two-story house consisting of four rooms linked by a central flight of stairs. The house is decorated in an aggressively out-of-date style: in the kitchen there are 1920s appliances, and in the bedrooms a mix of nineteenth-century country furniture, creepy patterned wallpapers, and no-particular-period odds and ends. Within this slightly seedy house are seven dwarfish tenants who conduct themselves with anything but the serenity of dollhouse props. *The House of Death and Life* is less a picture than an oversized object: at the top corners of the rooms Laderman has painted decorative brackets which make us feel as if we’re peeking into a series of little compartments, and atop the whole ensemble he’s placed a wooden roof that breaks up the ordinary, rectangular shape.

In certain respects, the melancholy boy-girl goings-on in these rooms are a series of variations on Balthus’s 1933 illustrations for Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*. As in Balthus’s ink drawings, in Laderman’s painting we see figures whose fevered, mind-incapacitating craziness is expressed through the rigid angularity of their poses. Laderman borrows an oddly big-headed figure, a gesture, a juxtaposition of pieces of furniture from Balthus, but Laderman’s *House of Death and Life* is as loosely and quirkily related to the *Wuthering Heights* drawings as that series is to the nineteenth-century book illustrations Balthus had in mind. The *Wuthering Heights* drawings are the closest the great French artist has ever come to a pure narrative art, and on most of the occasions in the 1930s when Balthus adapted a motif from one of them to canvas he gave

the painting a distinct, self-contained, thoroughly unnarrative quality. Balthus, who has never done a conventional narrative painting, rejects storytelling, which he must think inconsistent with easel painting, in favor of figure painting, which is his glory. In *The House of Death and Life* Laderman, who seems to know he’s neither a gifted figure painter nor a natural storyteller, mixes figure and story into a strange, altogether new brew. As narrative, *The House of Death and Life* is incomprehensible.

Laderman’s painting is a collage of discrete, dramatic scenes. In the central downstairs hall stands a young woman in a nightgown who puts one foot on the bottom step of the stairs as if she’s about to climb up to the second floor. Above her head, the empty upstairs hall looks like nothing so much as a Precisionist abstraction of sharply angled light and dark forms—a brooding, muffled tone poem. Like the rest of the characters in the painting, the woman in the hall seems both aware of what’s going on elsewhere in the house and also locked into her own, compartmentalized psychic space. In one of the upper bedrooms a girl is sitting on the edge of a bed strangling someone—it’s either an old hag of a woman or a guy with long hair. In the other upstairs bedroom a young man lies (dead? asleep?) on the floor, while above his head there appears out of thin air a vignette vision of the bust of a young, full-breasted woman. Downstairs, in the room below where the strangling is going on, another young man sits at a desk, craning his head practically off his neck as he eavesdrops on what’s going on above. In the kitchen we again see the young woman in the nightgown, now with another woman, who is nude. The two of them are seated, oblivious to one another, joined in a Beckettish silence.

These incidents are the shattered, disjunctive fragments of a story. Like the scenes in Laderman’s earlier *A Crime and its Consequences* cycle, they’re based on one of George Simenon’s Inspector Maigret novels. But even if you’ve read *Maigret and the Spinster* (the novel about life in an apart-

ment house from which the scenes derive) *The House of Death and Life* maintains its peculiar, enigma-variations aura. Laderman's painting has the same relation to Simenon's narrative that Cubist still lifes have to ordinary nature: the pieces may all be present, but they're hopelessly, disturbingly scrambled. Laderman's figures—roughly two feet high—are like dwarves seen in the reducing glass of a dream; *The House of Death and Life* is an artfully contrived human ant farm. You may know that Laderman is playing off of the box-like space of Duccio's *Maestà* altarpiece in one scene, or that he's thinking about Mantegna's frantically foreshortened figures in another scene, yet the associations feel murky, subterranean. The odd juxtapositions of scenes and the way formal connections are made between discontinuous boxes of space recall some of the major Renaissance wall-painting cycles; but the references are so private, so jumbled up that the ensemble ultimately feels more closely related to hard-to-classify modern works like the boxes of Joseph Cornell and Giacometti's *Palace at 4 A.M.*

The House of Death and Life is a delirious Surrealist anthology of figure-composition possibilities; tradition appears less a safe haven than a terrifying Babel of options. Each tilted floor plane, each piece of furniture seen from multiple perspectives, each queerly distorted figure pose has its precedent in the past. These are pieces of a kaleidoscope, patched together into a dollhouse that Laderman has erected in a New York gallery as a kind of neo-Freudian, secular

altarpiece. The face of a clock on the mantelpiece in one of the scenes is empty—a hole in time. This is the claustrophobic dream space of Surrealist poetry, and of Surrealist paintings such as André Masson's *Hôtel des Oiseaux*, in which two ghastly bird-skeleton creatures inhabit two mean rented rooms.

Laderman hangs onto the wreckage of the old naturalistic conventions with a rare, exceptional zeal. As your eyes wander through *The House of Death and Life*, you get caught up in a multiplicity of incidents. You trace the trajectory of two overturned chairs that make a delicately curved, inward-turning path. Or you follow the enormous shadow of a seated figure as it creeps along a floor and climbs halfway up a wall. In these intricate, beautifully thought-through interactions of forms, Laderman expresses his love for the clarity of the old narrative art. (The elaborate overlappings of shapes and ingenious articulations of space in *The House of Death and Life* offer to the eye and the mind pleasures of a variety that Eric Fischl probably doesn't even know exist.) There's all this lucidity in *The House of Death and Life*; and yet the pictorial logic isn't allowed to cohere into a narrative logic. With its dark, bruised tones, its lurid highlights, its crazily charged incidents, *The House of Death and Life* is a portrait of the innards of a modern artist who's half gone in a fever dream of the past. The painting is a monument to the dilemmas of marginality. Tradition becomes a reproach—a howl—thrown at current events. "My room," said Apollinaire, "is shaped like a cage."

Photography

László Moholy-Nagy: adventurer in light

by Victor M. Cassidy

"I love to dabble," László Moholy-Nagy stated in 1946. "That is what made me what I am today. I was educated as a lawyer, but because I dared to dabble with plastics and wood and so on, I gained a wide experience Today I am 25% a scholar, and 75% an artist and a what-not."

Dabbler or no, Moholy had an extraordinary career. Over a period of roughly thirty years, he made important contributions to painting, sculpture, photography, and film. He served on the faculty of the Bauhaus and founded his own design school in Chicago. He was also a versatile designer, working in typography, creating stage sets and advertising displays, and making notable contributions to industrial design. He invented the Vista Dome passenger car for the B & O Railway Company, for example, and also designed the Parker Pen.

Moholy's career might best be described as a series of aesthetic adventures, and in his own view these many diverse activities came to be focused on a single interest—the expressive possibilities of light. "The capacities of one man seldom allow the handling of more than one problem area," he wrote in 1944. "I suspect this is why my work since [the beginning of my career] has been only a paraphrase of the original problem, light." This preoccupation with light naturally made photography a medium of central importance to him.

During his years of residence in Germany (1920-33), Moholy devoted considerable

energy to establishing photography and film as viable fine-art media in the minds of artists and the public. As a photographer, he cannot be said to have originated a method or technique of his own, but he made such bold, imaginative use of the established means that he is now generally recognized as one of the artists who brought photography into the modern movement. This view of his achievement has been amply confirmed by the excellent exhibition recently seen at the Art Institute of Chicago. "Moholy-Nagy: Photography and Film in Weimar Germany" is the most comprehensive exhibition ever organized of Moholy's photograms, camera photographs, and photomontages.¹

Organized by Eleanor M. Hight, the exhibition contained a hundred photographic works made by Moholy between 1922 and 1933, along with a selection of photographs by his contemporaries. Hight has also written a catalogue which describes in detail how Moholy's work and thinking evolved. She provides comprehensive analytical summaries of his early writings on art. The most important of these are *Buch neuer Künstler* (1922), an anthology of modern art that

1 "Moholy-Nagy: Photography and Film in Weimar Germany" originated at the Wellesley College Museum and was seen at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, before coming to the Art Institute of Chicago. Film showings accompanied the exhibition.

Moholy co-authored with Lajos Kassák, the Hungarian artist, writer, and editor; *Male-rei, Fotografie, Film* (1925), a typographically innovative volume in which Moholy argues that photography and film can be used to make fine art; and *Von Material zu Architektur* (1929), a description of the course he taught at the Bauhaus. The latter book was translated into English in 1930 as *The New Vision: From Material to Architecture*.

Moholy was born in Hungary's countryside in 1895. In his youth he wrote verse and short fiction, but when he entered the University of Budapest in 1913, he took the practical step of registering to study law. World War I interrupted Moholy's schooling; he was drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army and sent to the Russian front. In 1917 he was hospitalized with severe wounds and sent home.

It was while serving in the army that Moholy discovered his talent for drawing, which he demonstrated in sketches on postcards sent to his friends. Upon returning to Budapest he soon concluded that he really wanted to be an artist. For several months he took life drawing classes in the evenings and spent his days drawing and reading art books. He made such rapid progress that some of his watercolors were exhibited as early as 1918.

During this period, Moholy joined a group of leftist artists and writers known as the Activists. This radical group welcomed Béla Kun's short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic, which was proclaimed on March 21, 1919. When Kun's government fell in August, the Activists fled to Vienna. Moholy joined them there in December.

Finding Vienna claustrophobic, the young artist soon departed for Berlin, working his way across eastern Germany as a letterer and sign painter. He arrived in January of 1920, penniless, but determined to pursue his artistic career. Berlin was then home to many of Europe's leading artists and intellectuals. Moholy thrived there, transforming himself with astonishing speed from a competent landscape and portrait painter into a member of the avant-garde.

Shaping this development were Berlin Dada and Russian Constructivism. In the spring of 1920, Moholy saw paintings by Kurt Schwitters. He later met this German Dadaist, becoming his friend and briefly sharing a studio with him. From Schwitters and other Dadaists Moholy learned techniques of collage, photomontage, and typography. Somewhat later on, he saw Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist art and met El Lissitzki, the Russian Constructivist. By this time he had abandoned representation and was evolving an abstract style of his own. The influence of the Constructivists accelerated Moholy's development, drawing him away from rather tentative collagelike arrangements of geometric forms toward a more confident, more severe, and more geometric mode of abstraction.

"Glass architecture" was the name that Moholy gave to his mature painting style. In these works, the neutral background appears very deep. With no horizon line or sense of one, the artist's crosses, circles, bars, and lines appear to float in three-dimensional space. Where they intersect, the forms become transparent—like colored glass. The "glass architecture" paintings are among the most beautiful that Moholy ever made.

Another important influence on his development in the Twenties was Lucia Schultz, whom he met soon after arriving in Berlin and married a year later. She was Moholy's collaborator until 1929, when they separated. Not only was she better educated than he, she was also skilled (as he wasn't) in photographic darkroom techniques.

During the summer of 1922, the Moholys created their first photograms. These are designs made by laying objects on chemically coated paper and flooding it with light. The paper remains white where it is covered and turns dark where it is exposed to the light. By moving the light source and the objects, shadows and gray tones are created. Although the Moholys apparently believed that they had invented the photogram, the first works of this description were made in England around 1800, and two Dadaists—Christian Schad, a Swiss,

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and Man Ray, the American expatriate painter then living in Paris—created works by means of the photogram technique in 1918 and 1921, respectively.

Moholy employed “daylight” paper which darkened slowly, allowing him to witness and manipulate the photogram-making process. He worked in his kitchen, where he used natural light and everyday items—vegetable grater, wine glass, cloth napkin, and the like. His first photograms resemble Schwitters’s collages.

Although familiar objects and tantalizing, semi-recognizable shapes appear in Moholy’s photograms, the viewer soon loses interest in the guessing game and enters imaginatively into his smoky, mysterious images. Shapes float freely before the intense black background. Dematerialized, they recede into infinitely deep space. The light has no apparent source: it simply exists.

As Moholy gained experience, he produced quite complex effects. He employed prisms to bend the light, and sometimes reversed his images, making the background white and the shapes dark. In order to make the forms in his photograms change and move, he envisioned a device that would reflect light from an external source onto walls and ceiling in an ever-changing sequence of patterns. With two of his friends he spent several years trying to transform this idea into reality. Finally, in 1930, he succeeded in creating the Light-Space Modulator, a motor-driven sculpture nearly five feet high and two and a half feet across, made of polished metal and plastic plates and forms. When the Light-Space Modulator was first set in motion Moholy “felt like the sorcerer’s apprentice.” The invention, he later wrote, was “so startling in its coordinated motions and space articulations of light and shadow sequences that I almost believed in magic.” Soon after he made a six-minute silent film (*Black White Gray*) of the machine in action.

Friends worked virtually gratis on Moholy’s projects because he fired them with his limitless enthusiasm. This “eternal-primitive child-barbarian,” as one contemporary

called him, was a spirited and entertaining companion. While Moholy lived in Berlin, artist and writer friends gathered often at his studio for long, noisy discussions of their work. The spirit and substance of these meetings are preserved in Moholy’s early books and in essays he contributed to Hungarian, Dutch, and German avant-garde journals. His refreshingly informal approach to art and straightforward conversational style carry the reader along, compensating for occasional lapses in logic or phrasing.

Moholy created his first photomontages at roughly the same time that he started the experiments with photograms. Photomontages consist of images clipped from popular publications, photographic material originated by the artist, and black lines or patches of color used compositionally. These are the only artworks in which Moholy makes political statements or treats personal themes.

By the time he made his first photomontages, Moholy had retreated from the extreme radicalism of his Hungarian Activist days and had become a democratic socialist. In some photomontages, he used military figures to symbolize organized repression and Africans to represent the victims of exploitation, arranging these images in a kind of hierarchy. *The Shattered Marriage* (1925) clearly refers to the artist’s deteriorating relationship with his wife. Here, a head with both a woman’s and a man’s face dominates a room-like space. She/he wears a headdress of firecrackers, some with wicks intact and others apparently exploded. On one wall hangs a picture of a couple engaged in a physical struggle.

Moholy also employed photomontage techniques in his advertising posters. Sometimes he borrowed images from his artworks and re-used them in ads.

Early in 1922, Moholy exhibited metal sculpture at Der Sturm gallery in Berlin. One visitor to this show was Walter Gropius, the founder and director of the Bauhaus in Weimar. Gropius was impressed with Moholy’s work and invited the young

artist to teach the advanced foundations course and metals workshop at the Bauhaus. No instruction in photography was offered at the school during Moholy's tenure there.

Gropius had founded the Bauhaus in 1919 because he believed that architecture had fallen into decadence, becoming the academic pursuit of people with little real understanding of the materials and craft work that go into a building. In order to re-unite architecture with its roots and thus to revitalize the field, Gropius devised an integrated curriculum in which students began with art fundamentals and materials, progressed through a complete apprenticeship in a single craft, and then studied architecture.

Though Moholy had no special gift for architecture, he was in complete accord with Gropius. He felt that painting too had lost its way because fine artists had isolated themselves from the crafts. He also liked to work with industrial materials and saw no difference between commercial design activity and the creation of fine art. With his metals workshop students, Moholy designed lighting fixtures that were later mass-produced.

His position on the Bauhaus faculty—he started teaching there in the spring of 1923—placed Moholy at the center of Germany's most accomplished community of artists. During his tenure, the staff included Josef Albers, Herbert Bayer, Marcel Breuer, Lyonel Feininger, Gropius, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Oskar Schlemmer.

On long, working summer holidays with colleagues, Moholy spent much of his time taking photographs. In camera photography, Moholy sought to reproduce light-dark relationships in nature and also to depict space in new ways. His method often involved unusual perspectives which gave priority to formal relationships over subject matter. Moholy never photographed landscapes, for example, but looked instead for "abstract" natural patterns such as sand shaped by the wind or a neatly trimmed lawn. He composed his photographs along the diagonal, paying close attention to light

and shadow, and to the arrangement of objects in space. Figures, when they appeared, functioned as anonymous elements in the design. In the few portraits that Moholy made, the subject is carefully posed and never permitted spontaneous expression. He carried this same interest in abstraction into his films. *Berlin Still Life*, a film that Moholy created in 1926, gives us city views taken from unusual perspectives; the result is clearly intended to orchestrate visual forms rather than depict people or famous sights.

The technical quality of Moholy's photographic prints rarely rises above the mediocre. He never bothered to learn darkroom techniques; and after the marriage to Lucia ended, he simply sent his work out for commercial processing. Beaumont Newhall has stated that Moholy once told him that "if his seeing was not strong enough to stand up to the routine processing of the corner drugstore, then he wasn't seeing in a challenging way."

During the five years that he spent at the Bauhaus, Moholy became Gropius's chief assistant and a popular, influential master. He made major contributions to the curriculum and spread Bauhaus philosophy through his own writings and the series of *Bauhausbücher* that he and Gropius co-edited.

In order to maintain good relations with the public officials who subsidized his school with tax funds, Gropius had forbidden political activity at the Bauhaus since its founding. Beginning in 1927, however, Hannes Meyer, a leftist Swiss architect on the faculty, and his student allies attacked Gropius, demanding greater freedom. In addition to this, forces within the local community wanted the Bauhaus to abandon its innovative curriculum in favor of vocational training.

Under heavy pressure, Gropius resigned from the Bauhaus in the spring of 1928, re-entering full-time private architectural practice. Moholy and several other teachers departed a few days later. Moholy returned to Berlin, lectured, wrote, created stage sets, and worked as a commercial designer. During 1930 he made some of his best camera

photographs on a trip to Scandinavia. While there, he met Sybil Pietzsch, who became his second wife.

Moholy's greatest achievements in photography were behind him when he left Berlin in 1933. Political chaos and the threat of war had scattered the German avant-garde, destroying its sense of cohesion and ending much of its communal life. Moholy, who was already an expatriate, had to flee once more and re-establish himself in a new country. Irrevocably separated from the community in which he had thrived, he became a man without a center. There is a sense of epilogue to his career after 1933.

He certainly did not stop working. He did masses of commercial design and advertising, wrote, lectured, taught, and travelled widely. He made numerous photographs, too, advancing to new levels of technical accomplishment. But the sense of exploration, of adventure, of a search for fresh possibilities had left his work.

Amsterdam became Moholy's home in 1934; he moved to London a year later. There he did commercial design, made films, and produced three volumes of photographs in rapid succession: *The Streets of London* (1936), *Eton Portrait* (1937), and *An Oxford University Chest* (1939). Though these books have considerable visual appeal, they represent a retreat from his earlier work and are rightly considered minor.

In 1937, a group of Chicago businessmen founded a design school there and invited Moholy, who was then living in

London, to become its first director. The New Bauhaus, as this institution was called, lasted only a year, but in 1939 Moholy raised funds for a successor which he named the School of Design. Organized along Bauhaus lines, Moholy's school made photography an essential part of its curriculum. Students learned all the techniques that he had worked with and were encouraged to try color photography.

Moholy died of leukemia on November 24, 1946. During his final illness he worked on a book-length description of the curriculum at the School of Design. Entitled *Vision in Motion*, this book appeared in 1947 and became, in effect, his artistic testament.

In *Vision in Motion*, Moholy accorded photography a central place, calling it "a new medium of expression" that had "not yet achieved anything like its full stature" when compared to painting. "But in painting so in photography," he concluded, "we have to learn to see, not the 'picture,' not the narrow rendering of nature, but an ideal instrument of visual expression. If we can see in the genuine elements of photography the self-sufficient vehicle for direct, visual impact based upon the properties of the light-sensitive emulsion, then we may be nearer to 'art' in the field of photography too." In the four decades since his death, the innovations which once caused so much excitement among the avant-garde have become standard classroom exercises, and the ideas which prompted them are now part of received photographic doctrine.

The world of Pope

by David Paul

The *Zeitgeist*, the Spirit of the Age in literary history, always calls for an eminent name as a convenient label: the Age of Dryden, of Johnson. A writer who gives the period he lived in his name must have been an acknowledged authority in his own time, a conspicuous leader in his style and opinions—which cuts out Dante, or Shakespeare. But what name can be attached to the period 1700-1740? Pope and Swift are the first names that come to mind. In retrospect it was just as much the age of Defoe, but he was despised in his time as a hack pamphleteer. And Congreve, as brilliantly gifted as any of the three, gave up with the appearance of *The Way of the World* and retired into a thirty-year silence.

Pope and Swift were in many ways temperamental opposites. Swift was a hypochondriac, naturally endowed with health and vigor, but with a morbid hatred and disgust for the fleshly functions: a man too who lived in daily terror of smallpox. Invited once to stay at a country house with a group of friends, he was made the victim of a hoax to play up his terrors. One of the group, on some pretext or other, went ahead of the party, to meet them on their arrival at the gates of the great house with solemn news: there was a case of smallpox in the household. Nothing would induce Swift to enter it. There were small buildings of various kinds on the estate, and having settled on one of these, he insisted on a bed and an abundance of bedding being brought out,

while the rest of the group studied and admired the care and particularity which Swift devoted to having his bed made to his Epicurean requirements.

Above all, Swift throughout the latter half of his life was a disappointed man, nursing his resentment at the failure of his political ambitions and the further humiliation of being relegated, dismissed by promotion, to an Irish deanery, where his opponents could feel he was safely out of the way. Alexander Pope's professional career, as is well illustrated in Maynard Mack's lavish new biography,¹ was to prove on the contrary a singular success, against all the odds of chance and a formidable array of personal handicaps. He was born a Catholic, which would automatically proscribe him from public office, from the sinecures which were the standard support sought by such writers as Congreve and Gay to supplement their meager incomes; worse still, he was literally dwarfed by an accident in infancy, and he most probably imbibed from his wet nurse the tubercular infection which distorted his spine and rib cage and made a sort of rigid corset a necessity for keeping him erect. So from early years he must have learned to steel himself against the shock which any new acquaintance might betray on meeting him for the first time, though as a bright-eyed child full of eager intelligence, and a

1 *Alexander Pope: A Life*; Yale University Press; 975 pages, \$22.50.

prodigy of poetic learning and accomplishment, he must have had a touching charm about him. And from the beginning he had the talent and determination to win intelligent and influential friends. His genius for making enemies was to emerge later as a temptation not to be resisted. But perhaps no other English poet ever had such a wide circle of distinguished friends and acquaintances. It was thanks to these that his scheme of translating Homer, in an edition to be subscribed for in advance, was to prove a financial success, a reward for hard work which provided him with the foundation of a private income. He was equally astute in the business of coping with and eluding the dictatorial power of the publishers of his day.

The England, and the court, of the later Stuarts did all they could to emulate the style of France and Versailles. It was the Age of Man as Social Animal, and poetry was expected to conform to this. In Pope's case it pre-eminently did. His praises of solitude and seclusion are conventional, however essential they were to his long hours of hard work. He was to owe his early success to his precocious mastery of his craft, and its immediate appropriateness of style and theme to what was expected at the time. An intelligent view of contemporary society cannot subsist without satire in some form, and the great age of satire in English had already begun with Dryden, and continued to a climax with Pope and Swift.

Yet it's a curious irony that if Pope had died at the same age as a very different poet, Keats, he would still hold a pre-eminent place in the annals as the author of the most brilliantly wrought narrative poem in the language. What might not have been expected of a writer who had achieved "The Rape of the Lock" at twenty-five? What followed, particularly in some of the Epistles, was worthy of it, but never came equal. The "Rape" is the only work of Pope's in which he achieves complete imaginative projection. Instead of being personally present, as in all the Essays and Epistles, he disappears into the world he evokes and creates, as though behind a mirror. His wit and imagination

are omnipresent in his own absence. Keats's counsel to Shelley regarding his poetry, to "load every rift with ore," is here fully exemplified in a poem which neither Keats nor Shelley much regarded, if at all. From the very beginning every line is delicately loaded and balanced. Irony is ever-present but not overstressed.

Now lap-dogs give themselves the rousing
shake,
And sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake.

And already objects begin to acquire a mysterious animation, as though without any human agency:

Thrice rung the bell, the slipper knock'd the
ground,
And the press'd watch returned a silver sound.

I think Pope's poem has something in common—surprisingly—with Lewis Carroll's masterpiece, the two Alice books. In both cases the work is sustained and governed by the element of parody. The word "parody" seems to belittle what it denotes; but the practice is as old as Aristophanes. Even *Don Quixote* is a tremendous parody, every disastrous adventure of the dreamy hidalgo is a parodic reflex of an episode in one of the chivalric romances that haunt his aging brain and drive him forth to emulate their heroes. In *Hamlet*, besides the play-within-the-play, there are two or three other distinct elements of parody; its plot is a mirror reflex of the plot of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Art seems to have to grow out of itself, as much as out of the individual maker's life and experience.

One climactic episode in the "Rape" is of course the Homeric warfare of the card game Ombre. And here the mock-epic treatment serves to take the process of auto-animation to the limit, in the choreographic battle which the cards themselves appear to wield, regardless of the hands that play them.

With his broad sabre next, a chief in years,
The hoary Majesty of Spades appears,

Puts forth one manly leg, to sight reveal'd
The rest, his many-colour'd robe conceal'd.
The rebel Knave, who dares his prince engage,
Proves the just victim of his royal rage.

Then come the Diamonds:

Th' embroider'd King who shows but half
his face,
And his refulgent Queen, with pow'rs
combin'd,
Of broken troops an easy conquest find.
Clubs, Diamonds, Hearts, in wild disorder
seen,
With throngs promiscuous strow the level
green.

But it is after the card game, when the refreshments arrive, that this magic automation reaches its climax:

For lo! the board with cups and spoons is
crown'd,
The berries crackle, and the mill turns round;
On shining Altars of Japan they raise
The silver lamp; the fiery spirits blaze:
From silver spouts the grateful liquors glide,
While China's earth receives the smoaking
tyde.

In Pope's day every well-to-do family had its hierarchy of servants, and convention dictated that on any social occasion their function should be treated as though invisible. Here the poet takes the effect for fact; and the refreshments are treated as they arrive, as if they managed themselves. The routine takes on a charmed air of mystery, as if seen for the very first time: a quality akin to what Proust conveys, more particularly in his childhood memories.

But the crystalline mirror of the poem is not confined to the world of the tale it tells; it flashes glances at the contemporary world outside it:

Mean while, declining from the noon of day,
The sun obliquely shoots his burning ray;
The hungry Judges soon the sentence sign,
And wretches hang that jury-men may dine.

Swift would have nodded envious approval at the neatness of that, and perhaps grunted at the sexual innuendo of a famous line, so carefully prepared in a passage describing the various phantoms whose forms have been transformed in the Cave of Spleen:

Here living Teapots stand, one arm held out,
One bent; the handle this, and that the spout:
A Pipkin there like Homer's Tripod walks;
Here sighs a Jar, and there a Goose-pye talks;
Men prove with child, as pow'rful fancy works,
And maids turn'd bottles, call aloud for corks.

The innuendo is subtler (and not perhaps always noticed) at the moment when Belinda, bereft of her favorite curl, gives vent to her final climactic cry (my italics):

Oh hadst thou, cruel! been content to seize
Hairs *less in sight*, or *any* hairs but these!

I doubt if there is a poem of comparable length in the language which is so perfectly wrought, so finely judged in its control of narrative and mock climax, of visual and aural detail. The rhyming pentameter line evades, dismisses the usual threat of monotony, thanks to its cunningly varied range of emphasis:

Why round our coaches crowd the white-
glov'd Beaux,
Why bows the side-box from its inmost rows?
.
.
.
All side in parties and begin th'attack;
Fans clap, silks rustle and tough whalebones
crack

The range of sound effect and cross-rhythm in these two couplets alone is quite astonishing. In the first, the voluptuous sense of crowding conveyed by the crammed syllables is touched off to startling visual effect by "white-glov'd" and leads naturally to the quick, sketched-in notation of the serried ranks of heads in the theater, turning to bow towards Beauty, just arrived in her box. And, as often with Pope, a nominally weak syllable, the first, is given a studied empha-

sis. To ignore this is to mechanize the rhythm, kill its expressive force. Dr. Johnson, a tone-deaf poet who knew his accents and quantities, would have taken an exquisite line—"Sol thro' white curtains shot a tim'rous ray"—and firmly regularized it: "Sol *through* white *curtains shot a tim'rous ray*." He could then fall with eminent satisfaction on the regularity of the next line: "And op'd those eyes that must eclipse the day."

Pope in his later works was never to equal the accomplishment, variety, and range of this poem. But here is where Maynard Mack would disagree. He is clearly very much in love with his subject, and the period; and his approach to the task is nothing if not expansive. Up to now Pope has not been a favorite of the biography industry (as compared with Swift, for instance), but here we have what is surely the largest possible of studies on the subject, a truly opulent as well as a portly volume, incorporating in its thousand pages a gallery of nearly a hundred illustrations of the chief personae of the poet's life and times: a book to wander and get lost in—as the author himself does every now and again:

One is driven to speculation here, for we have no secure knowledge even of Pope's whereabouts between the ages of four and eight, much less of any part of his personal experience.

Within a page or two the tauntingly uncertain possibility that the poet-to-be, aged eight to ten, *may* have resided in Hammersmith has to be faced and filled in. Hammersmith, after all, "was close enough to London to allow frequent comings and goings, sometimes no doubt to visit Edith Pope's several London relations, the future poet's uncles, aunts and cousins; sometimes perhaps to see friends in the old haunts about Lombard street; or even possibly, now and then . . ." Possibilities can be endless where facts are minimal or nonexistent. Once we get into slightly maturer years, with the evidence of the poet's own early

writing, and that of friends and witnesses, there is rather less room for wild surmise: but there is still too much of "would have" and "may well have" and "one may easily guess (or suspect) that," and so on.

It seems to me too that the poet's religion is continually overemphasized. Pope was born and remained to the end a Catholic. But he is in no sense of the word a religious poet, like Crashaw or Hopkins. So the fact cannot justify an expansive background history of religious strife and persecution from the Reformation onward. In fact, this goes against the poet's own mature and succinct definition: "I am not a Papist, for I renounce the temporal invasions of Papal power, and detest their arrogated authority over Princes, and States. I am a Catholick, in the strictest sense of the word." A strictly delimited sense of the word.

As for the treatment of Pope's works, the author's assumption seems to imply a steady increase of merit and importance as one major poem succeeded another. This seems to rule out criticism, and leave abundant room for apologia and explication. Inevitably the "Essay on Man" has to be treated as a work of monumental significance in this progressive survey. Pope's motivation for embarking on this work is clear enough, from his own words. He was troubled by the trifling nature of his chosen subjects in his earlier works; and even the "Essay on Criticism" could be seen as being confined to his own province of the art of writing. By now he had the compensatory urge, and felt himself to be fully equipped to write something *weighty*, to move his poetic perspective into the larger world of morals, to rise to a general philosophical survey of the human situation. But in his urge to be serious and lofty, he leaves most of his skill, and all of his wit and irony, behind him.

Pope was no philosopher, and as a moralist he needs the specific human individual or circumstance which goes to the composition of the terrific portraits—Atossa, Atticus, Timon—which people the finest of the Epistles. But in the "Essay on Man" all he can offer as a moralist is a stock compendium of



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the fashionable views of the day. It is neither religious, nor still less Catholic in tone, but simply conventional Deist. And all he can provide to give it an appearance of force is the note of endless oburgation, of petulant harangue, which now threatens to haunt his later writing. The specimen "Man," whose ignorance and pride is peppered with rhetorical challenges and questions, is little better than a sort of abstract imbecile.

Is it for thee the linnet pours his throat?
 Loves of his own and raptures swell the note.

How gleefully Pope would have attacked some hopeful rhymester who wrote of little birds who *pour their throats*. And in the second line "raptures," displaced from any possessive for meter's sake, hangs empty like a pleonasm. In fact, the poem as a whole is a prime exhibit of all the faults that followed in the wake of the grand Augustan ideal of poetry and how it should be written: correctness gives birth to a procession of acceptable (i.e., correct) clichés, and smoothness

smoothes out meaning and expression. Here, there, or anywhere the eye can light on a couplet such as:

The starving chemist in his golden views
 Supremely blest, the poet in his Muse.

"Golden views" fails to express anything much—a sunset perhaps?—until we realize that by "chemist" alchemist is meant, and that "views" refers to his dreams or illusions of manufacturing gold in his laboratory. For me it recalls by contrast a couple of felicitous lines from an older poet: "As the vext chymic vainly chases His fugitive gold through all her faces"—which brings out image and meaning like a detail in a painting. And then as for "the poet in his Muse," the phrase falls into place with a mechanical click, simply to complete meter and rhyme. Or is it, by any chance, meant to convey a scene of ardent but hopeless copulation? The "Essay" came out in installments, anonymously, and was immediately hailed with enthusiasm by sundry hacks who had

abused and decried Pope's earlier works known to them as his. But their reception of this work is not quite a case of merit concealed. The stock moralities, the declamatory emphasis, the relentless mechanism of the lines as they seesaw across the central caesura, would all appeal to the born spouter, and his appropriate audience:

Honour and shame / from no Condition rise;
Act well your part, / there all the honour lies.
Fortune in Men / has some small difference
made,
One flaunts in rags / one flutters in brocade;
The cobbler apron'd, / and the parson gown'd,
The friar hooded, / and the monarch crown'd.
"What differ more (you cry) / than crown and
cowl?"
I'll tell you, friend! / a Wise man and a Fool.

For all its intended force, the climax of this passage of imperious harangue is curiously anticlimactic, like the conclusion of the poem as a whole, which is twice repeated, finally in capitals: *WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT*. This may mean something when uttered by a Zen or Christian mystic after a lifetime of meditation: but in Pope's context it is simply the watchword of complacency, like the borrowed precepts of Polonius, and very much of a piece with the poet's intended epitaph on Newton: "Nature and Nature's Laws lay hid in Night. God said, *Let Newton be!* and all was Light."

The approved wisdom of the day was based on the idea that, since the nature of light had been analyzed and the laws of gravity explained, along with much else, thanks to Newton's labors, all else was explicable and would be explained, laid bare by Newtons still to come. However humble Man must always remember to be before the Almighty, he would continue to improve his knowledge and capacities and increasingly learn how to understand and manage the natural world. With a little help, Nature could be raised to the status of a park when not exploited for human habitation and nourishment, and even its uncultured wilderness could be charmingly exemplified in the

"wilderness" which became a fashionable feature of every garden or great estate. As Voltaire's Doctor Pangloss was to repeat, improving on Pope's dictum and borrowing his own from Leibniz: "All is for the best in the best possible of worlds." Until Nature, smiling Nature, one day tore open an earthquake chasm which swallowed thousands of human lives in a matter of moments, at Lisbon in 1755: an event which shook up the thinking world as much as the first atom bomb was to do nearly two centuries later.

The year 1755 was after Pope's day, but even in his own time there was an enclosed, an imprisoning quality about the "enlightened" view of life and the world which engendered a secret element of revolt and dissatisfaction. Swift embarked his revolt and dissent on an imaginary voyage with Gulliver. And Pope, too, for all his praises of light and rightness, became fanatically irritated and obsessed with the idea of human darkness and dullness, to a degree that drove him on to his longest labor, "The Dunciad." There are lines of his own which might have warned him against the enterprise:

As things seem large which we thro' mists
descry,
Dullness is ever apt to magnify.

Dullness itself is magnified with a vengeance in this work—or perhaps multiplied is the word—to a degree where the final result is not so much a masterpiece as a morass. Pope should have been the first to agree that moral satire is one thing, and ridicule, however envenomed with resentment or revenge, is quite another. Colley Cibber, who was promoted to prime target and hero of the poem for his pains, nevertheless gave a fair and reasonable judgment of it: "A better poem of its kind than ever was writ," he remarks generously enough; but as for all the persons attacked: "A man might as well triumph for having killed so many flies that offended him. Could he have let them alone, by this time, poor souls! they had all been buried in oblivion." But there they still hang, the corpses of the flies embalmed, the

never illustrious and now unknown, except for the identifying footnote. Only Cibber's praise is a trifle exaggerated, since the "Dunciad" was obviously inspired by the example of Dryden's "Mac Flecknoe," though it has none of the genial muscularity, the pace, the concision, and the fun of that poem. Pope's "fun" by contrast degenerates into a puerile nastiness at times.

What was the cause of so much rancor? Why was he so perversely fascinated by the world of Grub Street, its squalor, poverty, and internecine jealousies, which, thanks to his own gifts, and his keen business sense in exploiting them, he had always escaped? As his stricken body aged, his exasperated sense of his own keener intelligence seems to have grown more venomous, a poison he had to get rid of by one means or another. He could inflict the sharpest wounds, but his sensitivity suffered far more from blunter blows than the ones he gave could inflict on his enemies. But having once engaged in this one-man warfare with the armies of the stupid, he could not give it up. And as for the naming of names, he should have kept in mind his own counsel, as given in one of his Imitations of Horace: "The fewer still you name, you wound the more."

Swift all his life had the yearning to be a poet. He could never forgive Dryden, a distant kinsman of his who, after reading some of his verses, responded brusquely with "Cousin Swift, you will never be a poet." Swift went on striving, in a style based on the now old-fashioned model of "Hudibras" and in later years he confessed how, after attempting a poem, he would turn to a reading of Pope, and could only admire and wonder at the younger man's accomplishment. But in another context he remarks how, as a satirist, he never on principle named names, or stooped to personal attack. How much would have been gained, how much lost, if Pope had kept to the same rule? It applies in a way to the superb portraits that animate most of the Epistles, but the best of these have a touch of urbanity or at least are too carefully balanced to suggest

mere animosity. And where pure hatred enters it animates with lightning effect and unforgettable invective. Poetry after all has much to do with human weakness. The trouble with most of the later attacks in "The Dunciad" and elsewhere is that they are simply as dull as their objects; whatever force they had has now disappeared in the fog of footnotes. Maynard Mack does his best to extenuate, even to praise these, but for me the effort is out of proportion compared with the result. The biography has far more value as a "life and times," with a whole gallery of other characters, from Bolingbroke to Walpole, from Lady Mary Wortley Montague to the Blount sisters. As *the* biography of Pope it is not likely to be superseded; as an extended critique of the works it is rather a different matter. There is an element of special pleading, a determination to relate the poetry to the present by one means or another, whether by "comparative" quotes from T. S. Eliot or by finding elements in Pope's writing that point to our "post-Freudian era." Pope brings his own living world, socially and morally before our eyes, but he was no prophet. He is in many ways the antithesis of a poet born only a dozen years after his death, William Blake. Blake too can employ powerful invective, but while it may seem more naïve, it *is* more subtle.

Curiously enough one of the most striking likenesses illustrated in this book is Blake's imaginary portrait of Pope, made in 1800. Would it have pleased its subject? And did any other poet ever ordain, sit for, or commission quite so many likenesses of himself? A portrait bust commissioned from Rysbrack, a gifted sculptor who boasted that he never flattered his sitters, was refused and returned by the poet. It has just come on the London art market, and sold with some *éclat*. If it doesn't flatter, it suggests considerable strength of character, and conveys no hint of physical shortcomings. Was it narcissism, this thirst the poet had for his own image? If so, I think it was of a special kind, a longing for a portrait that would justify, reveal his own true inner self, in spite of

what life had inflicted on his physical frame from the start.

Whatever his failings—vanity, lust for fame, spite, and the contrivances he resorted to in the cause of self-promotion—his was a heroic life. How little he refers to the trials of what he once calls, in a famous line, that “long disease.” How he fought it, and how hard he worked! And how he circumvented it, too, by resort to his endless circle of friends. He had next to nothing of the venality, the weathercock switches of loyalty and religion exemplified by his poet-hero, Dryden. He chose to keep the aloof position of a recusant, allotted to him by birth—in spite of even Swift’s attempts to persuade him to change it. Both he and Swift were very much of their time, yet each stood apart from it as witness and judge. Swift, the hater of the flesh and consequently of the human condition, almost certainly a nervous impotent, beset by the unrequitable passion of two adoring women, was as much a victim of his freak psychological make-up as Pope was of the miseries of his physical condition. There can be no comparison of merit between “The Dunciad” and *Gulliver’s Travels*. The latter is a work of infinitely more imaginative invention, and shows the vast superiority of a satire which rejects any form of personal attack. Is it coincidence that the final work of one should be a valedictory dismissal of man as yahoo, and the other, of man as moron, finally engulfed in his own inner and outer darkness? Subjective, objective . . . the two judgments hang between. Perhaps they can also be seen as the final reactions of the two writers to the age of complacent enlightenment through which they had lived.

Pushkin by the Bay

Vikram Seth *The Golden Gate*.
Random House, 309 pages, \$17.95

reviewed by Bruce Bawer

Let me begin by making it clear what *The Golden Gate*, the new “novel in verse” by Vi-

kram Seth, is not. It isn’t poetry: it doesn’t have (or attempt to have) the requisite depth or density; it isn’t rich in metaphor or other poetic devices; to examine it alongside a contemporary book-length narrative poem like Alfred Corn’s *Notes from a Child of Paradise* is to recognize that the two works are so utterly different in kind as to make comparison pointless. Nor is *The Golden Gate* a great novel: there can be little doubt but that, had it been written in prose, its characters would have come across as rather insignificant, its plot as less than compelling.

What this book *is*, however, is an extraordinarily accomplished work of narrative verse—one that has all the cardinal virtues of the genre, and has them in abundance. It’s engaging, well-paced, technically mesmerizing; indeed, one of Seth’s most remarkable achievements is that he makes us forget about those mainstays of contemporary literature, poetry and the novel, and reminds us how enthralling it can be to watch a prodigious versifier triumph, line by line, over an extremely challenging form—all the time developing a charming story, sustaining a sardonic yet sympathetic tone, and flourishing a marvelous wit. Seth has done something a good deal more difficult than compose a respectable contemporary novel or long poem: he has given new life to a genre that, for no good reason, has in the present literary climate come to be considered passé, retrograde, even infantile. The result of his efforts is one of the most delightful new books in recent memory.

The Golden Gate is composed in the “Eugene Onegin” stanza, the form invented by Pushkin a century and a half ago for his classic novel in verse. Each of Seth’s 590 sonnet-length stanzas of iambic tetrameter—like each of the 400 stanzas of *Eugene Onegin*—follows the rhyme scheme aBaB ccDD eFFe GG, with lower-case letters denoting feminine rhymes and capitals denoting masculine rhymes. (Perhaps the number of stanzas in *The Golden Gate* should actually be reckoned at 594, because Seth’s acknowledgments, dedication, table of contents, and author’s note are also written in the

"*Onegin*" stanza—thus outdoing Pushkin, whose work was prefaced only by a dedication in verse.) Like Pushkin, Seth addresses his audience as "Gentle Reader," divides his book into chapters, and numbers each stanza. In stanza 5.5 he acknowledges his debt to Pushkin:

Reader, enough of this apology:
But spare me if I think it best,
Before I tether my monology,
To stake a stanza to suggest
You spend some unfilled day of leisure
By that original spring of pleasure:
Sweet-watered, fluent, clear, light, blithe
(This homage merely pays a tithe
Of what in joy and inspiration
It gave me once and does not cease
To give me)—Pushkin's masterpiece
In Johnston's luminous translation:
Eugene Onegin—like champagne
Its effervescence stirs my brain.

Seth has taken more than his form from Pushkin. Like *Eugene Onegin*—and like Byron's *Don Juan*, which strongly influenced Pushkin—*The Golden Gate* describes, with amiable irony, the romantic adventures of a privileged, rather naïve young man who takes himself perhaps a bit too seriously. He is in this regard the direct opposite of his creator, for Seth, like Pushkin and Byron, never takes anything too seriously, himself least of all; on the contrary, he pokes playful fun at nearly everything available—his poem, his hero, even the conventions of verse to which he is scrupulously conforming. Like Pushkin, too, Seth is a meticulous and sensible observer of the place and time in which he has found himself: the manners, means, and mores of contemporary America fascinate him. (He is not, however, one of those writers who make a career out of listing the names of cars, television programs, or product brand names; he puts all such paraphernalia in their proper place.) It is indicative of the Sethian sensibility that the chain of events in *The Golden Gate*—in which the lives of several people are changed utterly—is set in motion by a misguided frisbee:

To make a start more swift than weighty,
Hail Muse. Dear Reader, once upon
A time, say, circa 1980,
There lived a man. His name was John.
Successful in his field though only
Twenty-six, respected, lonely,
One evening as he walked across
Golden Gate Park, the ill-judged toss
Of a red frisbee almost brained him.
He thought, "If I died, who'd be sad?
Who'd weep? Who'd gloat? Who would be
glad?
Would anybody?"

So it begins. Our hero, John—a "chaste, ambitious" executive with Datatronics, a Silicon Valley defense contracting firm, whose "plastic name tag hangs around/His collar like a votive necklace" and whose friends "claim he's grown aloof and prim"—suddenly finds himself tormented by his solitary life. He "feels an urgent riptide drawing/ Him far out, where, caught in the kelp/Of loneliness, he cries for help." But no one hears. He tries to lose his newfound sorrow in rock music, but it doesn't work:

He goes home, seeking consolation
Among old Beatles and Pink Floyd—
But "Girl" elicits mere frustration,
While "Money" leaves him more annoyed.
Alas, he hungers less for money
Than for a fleeting Taste of Honey.
Murmuring, "Money—it's a gas! . . .
The lunatic is on the grass,"
He pours himself a beer. Desires
And reminiscences intrude
Upon his unpropitious mood
Until he feels that he requires
A one-way Ticket to Ride—and soon—
Across the Dark Side of the Moon.

Reading doesn't help either. The "pensive prose" he wraps himself in ("*Life's Little Ironies* by Hardy,/ The gloomier sermons of John Donne,/ The *Zibaldone* of Leopardi,/ The *Queen of Spades*") sinks him even deeper into "the crevasse of melancholy."

Finally, John presents his problems to his former girlfriend, Janet Hayakawa. She is,

we learn, a sculptor whose work the art critics consistently savage:

Blind mouths! They spew their condescension:
Miss Hayakawa, it appears,
Lacks serious sculptural intention.
Where has she been these thirty years?
Are Moore's and Calder's use of medium
Unknown to her? The languid tedium
Of lines too fluid to show pains
Reflect this artist's dated chains:
Derivative, diluted passion,
A facile versatility . . .
 With smooth and blinkered savagery,
 Servile and suave, obsessed by fashion,
 These chickenhearted chickenshits
 Jerk off their weak and venomous wits.

In her seemingly effortless dexterity and indifference to artistic trends, Janet is plainly something of an alter ego for Seth himself (who may well be suggesting, in the above lines, the sort of critical reception he expects *The Golden Gate* to receive from faddish critics). It is she who comes up with the solution to John's problem: behind his back, she places a personal advertisement on his behalf in the *Bay Guardian*. John, irritated, berates Janet for pulling such an underhanded stunt ("Why did you choose to loose this host/Of bacchantes on me through the post?"), but eventually agrees to look over the responses to the ad. So it is that he ends up meeting and falling in love with a sweet and lovely young San Francisco attorney named Liz Dorati.

In its early stages, Liz and John's romance is appealingly corny, rather in the way romances in Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals are meant to be. On their first date, "They look, half smiling, at each other,/Half puzzled too, as if to say,/ 'I don't know why I feel this way.'" On the second date, John can't decide if Liz is "A woman, or divine illusion?" Before long they are exchanging nothing but baby talk:

Their diction has, alas, become
 Incomprehensible and numb.

Their brains appear to be dissolving
 To surgary sludge as they caress.
 In lieu of fire, force, finesse,
 We have a ballet now involving
 A pretty pas de deux instead,
 With common Walkmans on their head.

This pas de deux—which, unfortunately, soon develops into something of a *mano a mano*—is not the book's only love story. In due course we meet, and watch a romance blossom between, Liz's brother Ed and John's friend and former colleague Phil Weiss. Ed, twenty-three, works in advertising; Phil, thirtyish, divorced, with a young son named Paul, has recently quit his job designing missile guidance systems at Data-tronics because "To go on would have been high treason/To common sense and humankind." Though the two men are in love, their affair is doomed by the fact that Ed, every so often, falls into a "godly mood," wherein he feels a pious contempt for his homoerotic urges and wonders: "can he/Make Phil consent to chastity?" Phil has no patience for this part-time piety: "Your religion/Doesn't square too well with your lust./I wonder which first bites the dust!" Ed tries to talk Phil into a Platonic friendship:

If lovers cannot cease caressing,
 Isn't it that they long to find
 Their bodies' unity expressing
 A truer unison of mind?
 For us this oneness is reality.
 Can't we dispense with the banality
 Of intermediary ends?
 Phil, let's just—why can't we be friends—
 And find this craved complementation
 Of our true selves in its true form,
 The love that keeps our spirits warm
 Through the shared touch of conversation?

But Phil isn't having any of it. "Does earthly beauty just exist," he asks,

For contemplation? Why, unduly,
 Would God create a perfect form
 If not to make our lives more warm?

It seems to me a curious fashion
 To give a man an appetite,
 Then tell him a starvation ration
 Is all he's due for. I don't quite
 Get why religion makes you grateful.
 I would say, Ed, that it's a hateful,
 A pretty odious-spirited trick
 To make you as you are, then stick
 The pin of infinite damnation
 Into you

Neither of these romances, then, is a model of mutual compatibility. All four lovers must make the journey through discord to reach harmony.

For all the discord, though, the world of this book is one in which everybody—with the notable exception of a few cruel and distant art critics—is essentially decent. There are no villains here (no *human* villains, anyway). Instead, the principal conflicts tend to arise out of the characters' irritation with each other's quirks and foibles (which, to a reader at least, are mostly quite amusing). John, for instance, employs Yuppie metaphors ("The Dow-Jones of my heart's depressed," he tells Janet) and indulges in self-dramatization ("I die! I faint! I fail! I sink!"); Janet, a connoisseur as well as perpetrator of hard rock, says things like "You are the DJ of your fate"; and Liz pursues gestalt therapy, practices "holistic/Modes of ingestion," and is neurotically devoted to her nasty old cat Charlemagne. Yet Seth's affection for all of his characters is incontrovertible—and contagious.

Affection, in fact, is what his book is all about. Its ultimate lessons are wonderfully simple ones: that love and friendship are the finest things on earth; that life being short, youth evanescent, and the world unstable, human attachments should be cherished, not repudiated; and that the silly, arbitrary ways in which people come to discover and care about one another does not gainsay the beauty and dignity of their devotion. In *The Golden Gate*, even the nuclear-weapons issue is secondary to love and friendship. Seth

devotes several stanzas to an angry debate on this topic between John and Phil, in which he presents both sides intelligently, comes down on neither side, and makes it clear that—though they differ radically on this great life-and-death question of the day—the two young men, at the close of the argument, remain friends; and this, to Seth, is what's most important.

Although he keeps his own politics out of the debate between John and Phil, Seth, like Pushkin and Byron, is far from reluctant to draw attention to himself. He makes a Hitchcock-like cameo appearance as "Kim Tarvesh" (an anagram for "Vikram Seth") at Liz and John's housewarming party, and, à la Pushkin and Byron, digresses amusingly from his narrative on several occasions to inject an ironic observation or autobiographical tidbit:

A week ago, when I had finished
 Writing the chapter you've just read
 And with avidity undiminished
 Was charting out the course ahead,
 An editor—at a plush party
 (Well-wined, -provisioned, speechy, hearty)
 Hosted by (long live!) Thomas Cook
 Where my Tibetan travel book
 Was honored—seized my arm: "Dear fellow,
 What's your next work?" "A novel . . ."
 "Great!"
 We hope that you, dear Mr. Seth—"
 ". . . In verse," I added. He turned yellow.
 "How marvelously quaint," he said,
 And subsequently cut me dead.

The man, of course, was right. Seth's book *is* marvelously quaint, in the best sense of the word—which is to say that it's clever, elegant, and decidedly untrendy. Indeed, in an age when the work of some of the most widely touted young poets and novelists is numbingly soulless and torpid—and even, quite frequently, technically inept—the sweetness, wit, imagination, facility, and sheer joy of creation that shine out from every line of *The Golden Gate* are glorious to behold.

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Derrida at Yale

by Robert Greer Cohn

In the new biography of Sartre by Annie Cohen-Solal, I came upon the following line, which gave me an almost Proustian shock of pleasure and total recall: “[in 1948] the excellent review, *Yale French Studies*, devoted a whole issue to Sartre and existentialism.” Those were the years . . . What a haven Yale was for a young literary person then! Fresh out of World War II, we were eager to make up for lost time. Henri Peyre—who loves to reminisce about that generation—gave us his southern French warmth, his brilliance, his immense erudition. Out of a desire to give something back, I proposed that we graduate students start a magazine, on a shoestring, and since existentialism was in the transatlantic air, that was our first issue. It soon had to be reprinted.

I ran the founding number and the next one, “Modern Poets.” On the banana-yellow cover (Richard Wilbur pronounced it “succulent”) appeared names like Sartre (he sent us his then unpublished play, *Les Mains sales*), Henri Peyre, and Wallace Fowle. Roger Shattuck, home from flying the “hump,” gave us Apollinaire translations; Richard Wilbur sent down Englishings of Villiers from Harvard; Richard Ellmann offered us Michaux; Pierre Schneider did an article (his first) on Valéry and automatic writing.

I could go on, but enough. It is enough to make a man weep, especially when he thinks of what came after—after roughly 1968, that is.

Despite the gathering fog, the growing chill of dehumanization in literature and art, those cited names go on proudly, of course. Comforted by my awareness that they were out there somewhere, I went on to pursue my lifelong affair with Mallarmé, lesser flings with Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Proust, others . . .

In 1971 Paul de Man published *Blindness and Insight*, where I came upon the following:

Recent interpreters of Mallarmé, such as Jacques Derrida and Philippe Sollers, anticipated in some respects by the American critic Robert Greer Cohn, find in Mallarmé a movement that takes place within the textual aspect of language as mere signifier, regardless of a natural or subjective referent.

I was not altogether surprised, because by then I knew, from published statements, etc., that I had influenced the *Tel Quel* group generally, which at that time loosely included Derrida as well as Sollers, his wife Kristeva, et al. But, although I was naturally pleased in a way, I was also bothered. How had I, in pursuit of that warmly—and as Sartre claims, “passionately”—wonderful poet Mallarmé (whom all those other charming Yale-days writers admired and often wrote about), come to this chic emptiness?

I made my independent position known in my writings and teaching and watched my classrooms empty out as the youth flocked to the showy new banners of ideology and

skepticism about values. I hung onto my belief that one day all this would fade away like a bad dream. Alas, the nightmare from which we are struggling to awaken goes on and on. We were forcefully reminded of this by a lengthy article on Derrida and the Yale "Gang of Four"—which includes Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and the late Paul de Man—by Colin Campbell in *The New York Times Magazine* a few Sundays back (February 9). Before I too become a fading dream, I decided to try to put the record straight, so far as I know it.

Derrida has indeed been influential in our time, and singularly at Yale, but it is helpful to know what *his* sources were. He leans heavily on Nietzsche, Heidegger, Blanchot, and, not least, Mallarmé, who, as Roland Barthes remarked, was at the fountainhead of modern linguistics and all the critical, semiotic, and general intellectual to-do that came out of that. ("All we do is repeat Mallarmé. And we do very well when it is Mallarmé that we repeat.") In what is widely regarded as his best book, *Dissemination*, Derrida devotes the bulk of his energies to a deconstructive reading of Mallarmé's *Mime* and some related texts.

Now, deconstruction is very ancient, going back at least to the Sophists. Socrates took on in various dialogues of Plato. Those debunkers had understood what we later sophomores got excited about, that all truth is problematic by the very nature of the knowing process (which interferes with it, as in current physical notions of "indeterminacy"). Zeno of Elea made an early formulation of the dilemma, and Plato and Aristotle dealt with it variously.

Mallarmé, after Hegel and Kierkegaard—he knew the former's work glancingly, the latter's not at all—gave the definitive modern formulation with his "Fiction [is] the very process of thought," "A throw of the dice will never abolish chance," and so on. Accordingly, Sartre placed him "at the threshold of our era" in respect to the doctrine of the absurd, the meditation on suicide, and the rest.

But Mallarmé also formulated the antidote to this youthfully alluring half-truth. In a remarkable passage from *Igitur*, he showed that paradox turns against itself, making the absurd problematic, both true and not true. This complex dialectic, in the lineage of Kierkegaard's "absolute paradox," became the syntactical skeleton of his sketch for a Great Work, which was to become *Un Coup de dés*. In his 1894 speech at Oxford, he identified the formula for this paradox as "the symphonic equation proper to the seasons"—that is to say, a four-polar dialectic, as in paradox crossed by itself. Camus repeated the maneuver in his elusion of suicide in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, and of murder in the preface to *The Rebel*.

At the heart of these evasions of evil lies an arational "leap," like Kierkegaard's leap of faith from between the "crucifying" poles of dilemma. Camus ended up with a simple, good-hearted impulse not to follow the Nazis through what was, after all, an arbitrary logic of the absurd.

Now, Mallarmé had already come to a solution in his own way when he told a tinkering poetaster, René Ghil, "You can't do without Eden." That is a modest form of belief, like Camus's "sacred," and certainly undogmatic, but it makes all the difference. His poetry was accordingly rooted in a distant, lost totality, or Eden, as he put it, and made its way, however tentatively, toward it again.

This movement constitutes what he called elsewhere (in the Oxford speech, "Music and Letters") the "omnipresent Line" of existence, which gives existence meaning—in French, *sens* (both "direction" and "sense"). That omnipresent Line (which is traditional, normative, classic, metonymic), together with the "vast Circle" (of vision, cosmos, poetry, metaphor), affords some approximation to a plenary truth, as opposed to the one-sided, chic views of the deconstructionists. The fuller dialectic is found in all the major artists and thinkers: Proust's fusions of space and time, Joyce's Shem and Shaun, Lacan's interchange of metaphor and metonymy.

And yet it is a strange fact that Derrida himself, as I know explicitly from conversation with him on just that point, does not attempt a fuller dialectic. In fact, he distanced himself from it specifically. He comes closest to it in his notion of *la clôture* and *la différance*. Why he stops short is a source of some puzzlement to me, especially since in his *Dissemination* he announces his intention to explore these ideas in a future work.

But at any rate there it is: the imbalance remains, in Derrida and his disciples. The most essential dialectic—the one that produces the “higher balance” (as Camus called it in “Helen’s Exile”)—is between faith (corresponding to metaphor) and reason (corresponding to metonymy). This has been the healthy Catholic view since Saint Thomas and *should* have been the healthy modern view since Mallarmé. The Yale bunch illustrates the heretical pathology of runaway pride and critique: tone, beauty, and vision are lost, as is the faith-oriented line of meaning which leads to them. All that is left is a *dotted* line of debunking and point-scoring, plus the gloating face of the clever critic himself.

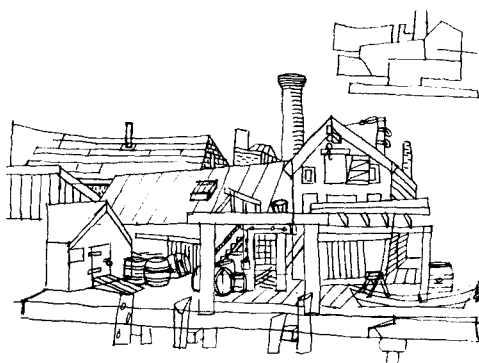
Not long ago, I attended a talk by a young professor who was illustrating how Godard, in his *Prénom Carmen*, had “trashed” Beethoven, as well as Mérimée, Bizet, and the whole bourgeois-elitist past which believed in individual personality as opposed to the systems-view which, she ritually restated, has replaced that in our day. A few weeks before, in the same spot, a former student of mine who had gone on to teach at Harvard reduced to rubble everything that her former professor (myself) had taught her about the—however elusive—meanings of Mallarmé’s superb texts, including *Un Coup de dés*, a page of which she exhibited on a projector screen, pronouncing it “irrecoverable.” Stunned by this betrayal, I began, in the

question period, to point out the perfectly obvious (even to the uninitiated) meaning in the beautiful text up there. I wondered aloud, to the audience, why, if the words meant whatever any reader wanted to put into them, my particular readings had elicited the enthusiastic response of Hermann Broch, Ungaretti, and Derrida himself, who in spirited pages of his *Dissemination* defended my interpretation against that of Jean-Pierre Richard! Taken aback by the audience’s clear sympathy for making some sort of sense in Mallarmé, my former student limply admitted that she had gone that route because it was the “in” thing to do now, and she needed to swim with the tide in order to get a better post.

Well, those Yale professors, most of whom I have known, can afford to give a little ground here and there about sense: they don’t need jobs. Some of them, as quoted in the *Times*, seem to have suspicions that they may have gone too far. One hopes, for example, that J. Hillis Miller, now that he is president of the Modern Language Association—an organization from which many of us resigned long ago because of the orgy of modish mediocrity—may come to regret the incredible obtuseness of putting Wallace Stevens in the same artistic sack with Robbe-Grillet or John Cage, as he did in his *Poets of Reality*. Perhaps Geoffrey Hartman, the owl, will eat a little crow for declaring the critic the generic equal of the artist. Who? Proust, Baudelaire? How Yale has changed since the days of Henri Peyre and René Wellek! At their feet we used to “crave to adore.” Faith like theirs may have gone underground for a dreary while in academia, but if the millions of folk who flock to worship Mozart in *Amadeus* give any inkling—or the pilgrimages to Proust’s Illiers-Combray—Cage, Godard, and the Yale pedagogues have a certain distance to go to prove their points.

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Schumann on the couch

by Robert Craft

Robert Schumann's life seems to be a greater focus of attention at present than his music, which is currently represented on concert programs only by his most popular songs, piano and chamber-ensemble pieces, and a handful of orchestral works. At least part of the explanation for this lies in our deficient understanding of Schumann's poetry-in-music, whose immediate appeal hides an art of remarkable subtlety. Three recent, Schumann-related books will no doubt add to our understanding of the composer's life; whether they will lead to a deeper understanding of his music is another question.

Schumann: Music and Madness, by Dr. Peter F. Ostwald, is the first full-length case history in English of the greatest of the German Romantic composers.¹ The book is thoroughly researched and documented, but its shortcomings, the most serious of them stemming from the psychiatric speculations threatened by the title, almost sink it. What keeps the whole afloat—just—is Dr. Ostwald's contribution to Schumann's medical history in the context of nineteenth-century knowledge and practice, and the generally commonsensical biography within the psychobiography.

It can be said at the outset that Dr. Ostwald's comments on Schumann's music ought to be ignored, although it may be

merely inane, and not deeply harmful, for him to write that the A minor quartet has a "light-hearted scherzo," or that *Träumerei* exposes a "melody of exquisite tenderness." In the absence of a study of Schumann's innovations—in thematic metamorphosis, suspended cadences, and open-ended phrases, for example—and in the presence of Dr. Ostwald's colloquialisms, the reader cannot tell whether the labeling of a section of a trio as "offbeat" means that the rhythm is syncopated or that the music is in some sense "way out."

Mercifully, Dr. Ostwald does not labor the familiar parallels between the growth of Schumann's mental illness and the changing formal aspects of his music, which is to say the abandonment of brevity, fantasy, and biographical and literary allusions in favor of classical structures and academic correctness. After all, the developments of many more or less sane composers follow a similar pattern. Nor does Dr. Ostwald attempt to associate Schumann's encroaching psychoses with the thickening of his orchestral textures and the narrowing of the upper pitch range. The latter too easily invites comparison with acrophobia, from which Schumann suffered all his life. Dr. Ostwald does maintain that the creation of Florestan and Eusebius was symptomatic of a schizoid tendency (could it not simply have come from a belief that three heads are better than one?); but then Schumann's later rejection of these alter egos must logically be seen as an im-

1 *Schumann: Music and Madness*, by Peter F. Ostwald; Northeastern University Press, 373 pages, \$24.95.

provement in his mental health, which is not the case.

Dr. Ostwald cautions the reader that "Psychotherapy as practiced today was almost unheard of in Schumann's time." Almost? But then, elsewhere Dr. Ostwald tells us Schumann "feigned" an "almost masochistic pose" toward his father-in-law. Feigned an *almost* pose? Today's psychotherapist, in any event, gives Schumann low marks in "interpersonal relationships" and "reality contact"; diagnoses "inner confusion" (as part of an "identity crisis") and a condition "close to paranoia"; contrasts Liszt's flamboyant "life-style" with Schumann's pursuit of an insular one (because of his "fear of rejection"); and traces the decline from the young verbal matador (who had taken part in "endless bull sessions") to the "inarticulate conversationalist" of later years. (Wagner reported, after one of their meetings, that Schumann had "remained mute for almost an hour"; but would *he* have permitted an edgewise word?) The same jargon is applied to Schumann's music: the opus 24 *Liederkreis* "deals obliquely with the problem of sexual frustration" (how?), while the interludes in *Carnaval* "probably allude to interactions between [the] main characters and may even have sexual implications" (what doesn't?).

Dr. Ostwald concludes that Schumann was homosexual. "It seems clear," he writes, that the composer "had one and possibly several homosexual encounters," and that he "tried to be . . . overtly homosexual." The evidence for this consists of two entries in Schumann's diary, one of them the isolated word "pederasty," the other a reference to a "homosexual who thrust himself on me, and my sudden departure." If confidence in Dr. Ostwald's scientific procedures survives this far, the mortal blow is struck a few pages later with his announcement of Schumann's kinship with Schubert, who "was probably exclusively homosexual." The basis for this is the *non sequitur* that Schubert belonged to a "coterie" of both "homosexual and bisexual Viennese artists" (an unusual combination?). Luckily, Schubert "solved [the] prob-

lem [of marriage] by remaining single," Dr. Ostwald adds, as if no more than a simple decision was involved.

Another argument in Dr. Ostwald's homosexuality thesis is that Schumann had a "compulsive tendency to disguise [his] hostility toward women in general and [his wife] in particular." Perhaps. But his misogyny, masked or otherwise, does not seem to have constituted a serious obstacle during "several years" of sexual intercourse with the unidentified girl Christel (so vigorous at one time that his sore frenulum had to be dipped in a distillate of daffodil bulbs), not to mention his seductions of other women, his fathering of eleven children, and his ongoing (thrice weekly, according to the diaries) conjugal life with Clara.

Even so, relations between Robert and Clara on other levels must have been severely strained in the later years of their marriage, and Dr. Ostwald is surely correct in adducing a resentment in Schumann toward his wife. Franz Richarz, Schumann's doctor during the two years of confinement (1854-1856) in the asylum at Eendenich, testified that the patient never mentioned her. Nor did she visit him, in all that time, until hours before his death. Richarz, presumably interpreting Schumann's wishes, discouraged her from coming; but she could have seen him—others did—especially since she was paying for his hospitalization. Richarz was withholding her letters to her husband, no doubt in the belief that they would have an injurious effect. But she must have suspected this, both because of the absence of any response, even through an intermediary, and because she had employed the same stratagem herself: a letter to her from Brahms reveals that he had kept back information from the doctor at her request.

Why did Richarz destroy his files on Schumann? Dr. Ostwald suggests that the motive might have been to protect Clara's reputation rather than to spare her some terrible medical truth, since she eventually saw the autopsy report. The files could have included damaging references to her as well as upsetting accounts of her husband's

behavior and treatment. Was Schumann ever physically restrained? Sedation would have been routine, and it is unlikely that he escaped the bleedings, cuppings, blisterings, cold baths, and other methods of the time used in treating mental patients.

Nancy Reich's *Clara Schumann* is comprehensive, clearly written, musically well-grounded, and fair in its judgments.² Although less than half of the book bears directly on Robert Schumann, Reich's account of the Endenich years adds details not vouchsafed by Dr. Ostwald, and simply by tracing the development of Clara's career as a pianist during the Endenich period Reich provides a new perspective. Whereas Clara participated in only ten concerts a year, on average, during the entire fourteen years of her married life before Robert's confinement, in the last month of 1854 alone she performed once every three days. In only two and a half months in 1855 she gave twenty-six concerts in England, travelling from there to cities on the Continent as far away as Danzig. Concert-touring again in 1856, she was in England when a telegram called her to her husband's deathbed.

This radical increase in the number of engagements cannot be attributed in any great measure to Clara's new freedom from the almost continuous child-bearing of the previous decade, since her pregnancies interrupted her concertizing only very briefly; she appeared onstage close to her confinements, in one instance only a week before, which no doubt raised the eyebrows as well as the apprehensions of the audience. Another factor must have been that she was fleeing the thought of the asylum, while salving her conscience by earning money to support her husband and family. Above all, by exploiting her independence she was returning to the path she had abandoned, not without a sense of sacrifice, for marriage. Clara was a virtuoso pianist and public fig-

ure first, a wife and daughter second and third (or third and second), and a mother somewhere lower on the scale. Her artistic ambitions could be fulfilled, however, only with invitations to perform. The conclusion is inescapable that more of these came, as they would today, in the splash of publicity following Schumann's suicidally-intended leap into the Rhine (February, 1854). Thereafter, throughout her long life as a pianist and forty years of widowhood, the name of the great composer she bore would help sustain her fame.

Nancy Reich sides with those who feel that Clara should have demanded to see her husband in Endenich. And Reich acknowledges that the strong-willed, domineering Clara inspires dislike in many people. One relatively minor cause of this reaction is the Bettina von Arnim episode. Clara was flattered when the famous writer asked to visit Schumann in the asylum, but disconcerted, after the meeting took place, by the recommendation that he be returned to his family. The principal source of antipathy toward Clara, however, is her neglect of—in Reich's phrase, her "emotional insulation" from—her children. The reader still wonders how Clara could receive the news of the death of her daughter Julie, tell no one, and play a concert the same day, saying to a friend in a letter that to have changed the date would have created difficulties.

Clara's failure to visit her son Ludwig during his first four years in a mental institution leaves more room for controversy. Some see her inaction as a natural turning away from memories of Endenich. Others believe that precisely because of Endenich she might have been expected to give her son attention, sympathy, and care. It must be said, in partial extenuation, that in much of her parental behavior she was following the example of her father in the home of her youth. To which one must add that Clara Wieck was too much her father's daughter to have enjoyed a smooth marriage with the great composer who was Friedrich Wieck's opposite in every way.

2 *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman*, by Nancy B. Reich; Cornell University Press, 346 pages, \$25.



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Reich's brief biographies of the Schumann children are so well presented that one regrets she did not go on to the next generation: two of the four daughters married, and their descendants are alive today, in Germany and Italy. It is odd, too, that Reich wrote her book, or at least its preface, in Hastings-on-Hudson, yet does not mention that Robert Sommerhoff, son of the Schumanns' daughter Elise, lived not far from there, in Poughkeepsie, New York, where his estate, which included a Schumann family photo album, was auctioned in July 1973.

Having deplored the encroachment of Schumann biography on Schumann music, I am now obliged to admit that the still unpublished sources are vast and include more than three thousand of Clara's letters. The first volume of the Schumann *Tagebücher* (to 1837) appeared only in 1971, the third volume and the *Haushaltbücher* (1837-1856) in 1982; the second volume has been announced for later this year. Though these documents cannot be expected to appear in

English for some time, they have already provoked world-wide discussion. For example, in reviews of the diaries and of the Reich book (both in the *Times Literary Supplement*), Judith Chernaik accepts as fact the diagnosis that Schumann had tertiary syphilis, "probably contracted in early youth." Dr. Ostwald, less peremptory, maintains that syphilis, congenital or contracted, is one among other possible diagnoses, and he demolishes an argument based on the use of mercury as proof of treatment for it, since the same toxic metal was prescribed for headaches, colds, sciatica, and diarrhea. We may believe that Dr. Ostwald's account of this and other aspects of the medical background is as thorough as facts permit. He examines what is known of the methods, attitudes, and careers of Schumann's doctors, even summarizing medical publications that *might* have influenced them. But not much of this can be positively traced to Schumann's treatment. Surprisingly, on Schumann's well-documented and comparatively late-in-life tinnitus, Dr. Ostwald adds

little, attributing it to labyrinthitis and "stress." If any area is open to investigation, it would seem to be the genetic: Schumann's sister Emilie was mentally ill and committed suicide, his father and a brother died of "nervous disorders" or "brain fever," and of his sons who survived infancy, one died insane and one became a morphine addict.

Other reviewers will complain about the insufficiency of some of Dr. Ostwald's general history, noting, for instance, that the *Sturm und Drang* era "aimed at" a lot more than "reducing the impact of French Classicism and the enlightenment [sic] upon European culture." No revolution in sensibility? No change in the role of Nature? No view of genius as inevitably alienated and probably pathological? And what of the exploitation of parody, so essential to Schumann's music? And of dreams?

Others will object, too, that Dr. Ostwald tends to look on the dark side of quite open questions. He tells us that after the fiasco of the Piano Concerto in Vienna, in January, 1847, Schumann uttered "a tragic prophecy: 'Calm yourself, Clara, ten years from now all this will be different.'" The tragedy is presumably Schumann's death before that time, but the remark might well have been intended to mean that the piece would be received differently in the future. So, too, Dr. Ostwald hears a tone of foreboding in Clara's 1850 diary entry on her husband's "heaven-sent" genius: "May you, my beloved Robert, always perceive this as such and always be as happy within yourself as you deserve." Dr. Ostwald's comment is: "In trying to free herself from the pangs of guilt for having disobeyed [her father], Clara may have had to delude herself into a belief that

her husband was doing far better than he really was."

A welcome contrast to modern psychobiography are the *Memoirs* of Eugenie Schumann (1851-1938), now reprinted after almost sixty years.³ The composer's youngest, best educated, and most musically gifted daughter writes with much charm (she knew English), ably conveying the period of her childhood and bringing people to life. She did not know her father, and before adulthood seldom saw her mother, having been brought up by her sisters and a governess and then sent to boarding school. Though Eugenie did not get along with her mother, the *Memoirs* are worshipful of her. And the rumor that Johannes Brahms was the father of Clara's last child had to be suppressed—but never has been, partly because it had been circulated in a pamphlet by Eugenie's own nephew, Alfred Schumann. Ironically, Eugenie's story should be read primarily for her portrait of Brahms, whom she knew well and loved. Here she recalls him at "our breakfast table":

We would often sit talking for a long time, but Marie [her sister] reminded him sometimes, Herr Brahms, you really must practice now or you will not play properly at the concert. Then he always got up obediently, went into the music room with his beloved cigar, and presently we heard the vigorous attack of his two fifth fingers, one at each extreme end of the keyboard, and arpeggios in counter movement through endless modulations followed.

3 *Memoirs*, by Eugenie Schumann; edited by Marie Busch. Eulenburg (London), 218 pages, £6.

Letters

To the Editors:

In the February issue of *The New Criterion*, David Pryce-Jones so entirely and deliberately misrepresents my book *Atrocity and Amnesia* that I can only wonder what made him suppose he would get away with it. He even goes so far as to tar with the Marxist brush a book several of whose chapters celebrate writers like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, V. S. Naipaul, and Saul Bellow. But then a reviewer who is inclined to smell a Marxist under every bed that has not been tucked and fitted in the best neoconservative way can hardly be expected to see what is in front of his ever so sensitive nose. In any case, Mr. Pryce-Jones ought at least to have a few simple questions and provocations put to him:

1. How is it possible for a given book—in this case, mine—“to treat political novels as academic documents,” that is, “to carry the aesthetic point of view to an extreme,” while at the same time falling prey to a “vulgar Marxism” which is said “to make a common political cause out of assorted writers”? The utter confusion and senselessness revealed in this example is characteristic of the entire piece by Mr. Pryce-Jones.

2. How can a person who has read a book detailing the political activities of a wide range of characters living in places like South Africa, the Belgian Congo, Haiti, Paraguay, and so on, speak about the book’s failure to specify “what activism might really be like”? Mr. Pryce-Jones refers in passing to my chapter on Nadine Gordimer. Could he have forgotten that it deals almost entirely, and at great length, with a family of South African activists named Burger?

3. How can a reviewer who begins by descrying the politicization of literature—by which, presumably, he means the tendency to judge works of literature by asking whether the politics of those works or their authors corresponds to one’s own—allow himself a sentence like the following: “Marquez does permanent Party duty, in whatever imaginative form it might be cast in his fiction”? From such a sentence we may conclude only that Mr. Pryce-Jones doesn’t care what García Márquez’s novels actually say or do. He knows that the novelist is a frequent habitué of Castro’s Cuba, and that is all he needs to know about him or his fiction to conclude that the object of his writing is political propaganda. If the propaganda is discernible to no one, if even Mr. Pryce-Jones cannot make out in a work like *Autumn of the Patriarch* the sinister lineaments of the Party member, well, just think how insidious are the obfuscations of these devilishly clever Latinos! Or is there some other meaning lurking in Mr. Pryce-Jones’s sentence, and the other sentences like it in a review which is bent on nothing *but* the politicization of literary discourse?

4. Is it cricket—that’s the game respectable, stolidly anti-Communist British boys like Mr. Pryce-Jones are supposed to play, I believe—for a reviewer to write that “in the world as it is, every one of them [the novels I discuss] had a specific context and purpose,” when the obvious intent of that sentence *in context* is to suggest, whatever the evidence to the contrary, that poor benighted Boyers wouldn’t know a context from a cantaloupe? A reader has only to consult the footnotes of my book to discover the contexts Mr. Pryce-

Jones misses. Or would he not credit as evidence of context references to demographic studies bearing upon Naipaul's accounts of Africa; or detailed references to official government accounts of South African township riots in Soweto and Sharpeville; or abundant references to important scholarly works on Soviet society under Stalin or the German population under Hitler? Reasonable persons may argue about the adequacy of these materials to the issues raised by the novels and discussed in my book. But the suggestion that my book does not care about specific contexts is an outrageous falsehood and may not be allowed to stand.

To any reader of *The New Criterion* interested in what now passes for responsible literary journalism I'll be happy to send a more extensive list of questions, equally tedious, which I should like one day to put to Mr. Pryce-Jones.

Robert Boyers
Skidmore College
Saratoga Springs, NY

David Pryce-Jones replies:

It must be quite frightful that laughter from the cricket pitches should reach as far as Skidmore College. Who could have imagined such a thing? Another unwholesome gust is prompted by what Professor Boyers writes, with his busy metaphors about beds and smells.

Repeating myself to someone who will not pay attention is a waste of time. I cannot find equivalence between novels which are disposed to totalitarianism and those disposed against it. I think that who is saying what, and when and where and why, are matters upon which moral judgments turn, and that these judgments are not relative.

Professor Boyers holds otherwise; he prefers to contrive theses whereby political novels of incompatible kinds are put upon the same standing—a strange proceeding which leads him to borrow from aestheticism as from vulgar Marxism, according to his needs for argument. Too bad.

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